

New Zealand's Labour-Greens government is imposing historic attacks on the working class

Tom Peters
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Tom Peters is a leading member of the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand). He delivered these remarks to the 2021 International May Day Online Rally held by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International on May 1.

The Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand extends revolutionary greetings to workers listening to this May Day rally throughout the world, including everyone in the Pacific region, where COVID-19 continues to cause immense suffering. The legacy of colonial rule by Britain, Australia, New Zealand, France and the United States has left many countries in this region severely underdeveloped, often with little access to clean water, let alone decent medical facilities.

In Papua New Guinea, the uncontrolled spread of the virus has killed more than 100 people and infected more than 10,000. That's the official figure, but authorities admit they have no idea of the real toll. The World Health Organisation (WHO) this week warned that PNG's health system is in a state of collapse and unable to address the crisis. This country of nine million people has received around 140,000 vaccines, including just 8,000 doses from the Australian government, which is utterly indifferent to the fate of people in Australia's former colony.

In East Timor, where more than 2,000 cases have been recorded, the pandemic is being exacerbated by flooding and landslides that left thousands homeless last month.

Fiji, which had been largely isolated from the virus, has just entered a two-week lockdown after several cases of the Indian variant were detected. The country's health secretary warned that "a single misstep will bring about the same COVID tsunami" that is being experienced in other countries.

The media has praised New Zealand as a model for its handling of the pandemic. But what is never mentioned is that Jacinda Ardern's government was forced to impose a relatively strict lockdown, just over a year ago, to preempt an incipient rank-and-file rebellion by health care workers, teachers and other workers, who were demanding a lockdown, independently of the unions, which wanted the schools kept open.

If the government had decided not to lock down, the unions would have enforced that decision, as their counterparts are doing in the US, Europe and elsewhere, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives.

Six months ago, Ardern's Labour Party was re-elected and formed a coalition government with the Greens. This was celebrated by the media and pseudo-left groups internationally, such as *Jacobin* magazine, as a progressive government that would benefit workers.

Only the Socialist Equality Group and the *World Socialist Web Site* told workers the truth: that this is a right-wing government, carrying out an historic assault on the working class.

Like every country, New Zealand remains highly vulnerable as long as the virus rages out of control internationally. Only 60,000 people have been vaccinated, about 1 percent of the population. A significant outbreak would overwhelm the health system. Public hospitals are run down and frequently filled to overflowing, with people waiting hours in emergency departments.

This week, an 11-year-old boy wrote to the Prime Minister saying he was angry that his nine-year-old cousin's heart surgery was postponed five times because there weren't enough intensive care beds. He pointed out that the government set aside \$250 million

to upgrade parliament, but refused to fully fund the expansion of Starship Children's Hospital.

Meanwhile, New Zealand's military budget has nearly doubled in the past decade, from \$2.6 billion to nearly \$4.5 billion last year, as the country has integrated into Washington's war preparations against China.

While it starves essential services, the Ardern government has handed out tens of billions in subsidies and bailouts, including to large corporations like Fletcher Building, SkyCity and Air New Zealand, which then proceeded to sack thousands of workers with the collaboration of the trade unions.

There is a worsening social crisis. About 12 percent of workers are now unemployed or can't find enough work, and median incomes have fallen more than 6 percent. More than one in five children live in poverty. Rampant property speculation has driven up rents by nearly a quarter since 2017, pushing thousands of families into homelessness.

The government, adopting the policies of the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, is seeking to divert blame by whipping up nationalism and xenophobia. Thousands of migrant workers are trapped outside New Zealand and barred from returning by a blatantly discriminatory border regime.

The ruling class's ruthlessness is pushing workers to the left and leading towards a resurgence of class struggle. Just last week, Wellington bus drivers, who make less than the minimum wage, were locked out by NZ Bus for voting to strike against the company's attempt to strip them of one week's leave and slash their overtime pay.

Nurses reacted angrily after recently being offered a pay increase of 1.38 percent, and nothing to address the staffing crisis in hospitals. This is even less than the 3 percent offered in 2018, which triggered an historic nationwide strike by 30,000 hospital workers before the New Zealand Nurses Organisation pushed through a sellout deal.

The betrayal of the 2018 nurses' and teachers' strikes demonstrated that as workers fight for decent wages and conditions, and to defend their health and safety, they will increasingly come into open conflict not only with the state and big business, but with the pro-capitalist trade unions.

The Ardern government's push to shut down the

investigation of the Pike River coal mine, where 29 men died 10 years ago in a preventable explosion, shows the lengths to which the Labour Party and the unions will go to protect businesses who put profit and production ahead of workers' lives.

Far from New Zealand being an exception, the brutal attacks on the working class under this government highlights the urgent need for workers to form new organisations of struggle, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Above all, we call on workers to join the Socialist Equality Group and fight to build it as the New Zealand section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, to unify their struggles with workers internationally, and fight for the socialist reorganisation of society.



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