

Socialist Equality Group meeting discusses New Zealand government's abandonment of COVID elimination policy

Our reporter
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On October 23, the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) in New Zealand held an online public meeting entitled “No retreat from elimination! Mobilise the New Zealand and international working class to defeat COVID-19!” Speakers from the UK, Australia and New Zealand addressed an audience of more than 30 workers and students from New Zealand, Australia, the US and the UK.

They discussed the international significance of the NZ Labour Party-led government’s announcement earlier this month that it will “transition” away from its previous policy of eliminating COVID-19 from the community.

The decision, which poses immense dangers for the working class, came as a shock to scientists and working people internationally who viewed New Zealand’s elimination policy as a model. In contrast to the vast majority of countries, New Zealand successfully stamped out transmission of the deadly coronavirus last year, using one of the world’s strictest lockdowns. This has limited deaths to 28 so far.

Chairing the meeting, Cheryl Crisp, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia, began by explaining that the elimination strategy adopted by New Zealand, China and other countries, had “proven to be highly effective and successful.”

The vast majority of governments, however, responded to the pandemic with the homicidal policy of mitigation or “herd immunity.” This program, driven by capitalist demands for schools and businesses to remain open, has led to an estimated 16.5 million deaths worldwide. Ardern, Singapore and others were responding to the same interests in discarding the elimination policy.

The task of ending the pandemic, Crisp said, fell to the working class, which had to be mobilised in a political struggle for socialism. She drew attention to the

International Committee of the Fourth International’s analysis of the pandemic as a “trigger event” in world history, comparable to the First World War. The war represented a breakdown of capitalism, which was only ended by the revolutionary upsurge of the working class throughout Europe and the victorious socialist revolution in Russia.

Tom Peters, the leading member of the SEG, explained how Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s government has rapidly turned to a policy of allowing COVID-19 to spread, “knowingly risking thousands of people’s health and lives.” An outbreak centred in Auckland has surged from just over 200 cases to well over 1,000 since restrictions in the city were loosened more than a month ago. Today, high schools in Auckland are reopening for thousands of students, with the collaboration of the trade unions. This will inevitably further accelerate the spread of the outbreak.

Peters refuted the claims of the government and the media that Auckland’s lockdown was not working and no longer needed because people can rely on vaccines. While important, vaccines alone cannot stop the spread of COVID-19. The government is ignoring scientists calling for a return to an elimination strategy and a hard “level 4” lockdown in Auckland to save lives.

Peters also debunked the international media’s glorification of Ardern over the past year-and-a-half. The government had only reluctantly implemented a nationwide lockdown in March 2020, “out of fear of an explosion in the working class.” Tens of thousands of workers, led by healthcare professionals, were demanding a lockdown, independently of the trade unions, which opposed such measures.

Labour and its coalition partners, the Greens and NZ First, had always prioritised big business profits

throughout the pandemic, with bailouts and subsidies funded by austerity measures at the expense of workers. The government was ditching elimination at the behest of powerful capitalist interests.

Peters called on workers to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of Labour and the trade unions, to oppose the reckless reopening of schools and businesses while COVID-19 is spreading.

UK educator and Socialist Equality Party member Harvey Thompson spoke about the stark situation in Britain, where Prime Minister Boris Johnson ruled out further lockdowns last November, declaring: “let the bodies pile high in their thousands.” Since the government lifted mitigation measures in July, more than 10,000 people had died and the country’s COVID-19 death toll had reached 162,620.

Thompson praised the example set by three recent school strikes, called by parent Lisa Diaz, in opposition to the reopening of British schools that has fuelled the surge in cases and deaths. The Labour Party and the unions opposed the stoppages, with union officials “castigating teachers and parents who were calling for strike action to save lives.” Thompson said the strikes underscored “a basic truth: if there is to be a fight to save lives, champion science and eradicate the pandemic it must be led by the working class,” independently of the capitalist parties and unions.

Patrick O’Connor, a teacher in Melbourne, member of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia, and of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), also addressed the webinar. He described the spread of the coronavirus as an “entirely avoidable and preventable disaster.” Australia is currently reporting over 2,000 COVID-19 cases per day and 100 deaths per week.

While the federal government of Scott Morrison never adopted an elimination strategy, state governments were initially forced to impose lockdowns last year. They were faced with “immense pressures that emerged within the working class,” O’Connor said, including a strike by warehouse workers in Melbourne who had been exposed to the virus, and discussions of industrial action by teachers and healthcare workers.

This year, however, the state and federal governments have deliberately allowed the highly infectious Delta variant to spread, telling the population they must “live with the virus.” O’Connor described how COVID-19 is surging through schools, which have been reopened with the full support of the teacher unions. The CFPE is fighting to expose the conditions in schools, including

hundreds forced to shut due to cases of COVID-19, and to mobilise teachers and parents independently of the unions and against the government’s criminal policies.

The speeches were followed by several questions and answers. One participant asked what the SEG thought of the Maori Party’s accusation that by allowing COVID-19 to spread, the Ardern government was paving the way for the “genocide” of Maori people. In response, Peters explained that the Maori Party, a right-wing, capitalist party, was seeking to derail a unified working class struggle against the pandemic by claiming that deaths were essentially a racial, not a class issue.

In response to a question about how other “socialist” organisations had responded to the abandonment of the elimination strategy, Peters pointed to the example of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation, which has criticised the change in policy while still supporting the Labour Party government. He also addressed a question about the role of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation, which utilised the pandemic to cancel industrial action and push through a sellout agreement, perpetuating the crisis of under-funding, low wages and understaffing in public hospitals.

Other audience members sought further information about the school strikes in the UK, including the attitude of the trade unions, the response by parents, and the response of the state. Thompson explained that the unions were highly conscious and fearful of the prospect of an upsurge of the working class, and the government was threatening parents with fines and even prison sentences. He added that most information about the spread of the virus in schools, and the school strikes, was suppressed in the media, but the strikes were strongly promoted by the SEP and the WSWS and received powerful support from parents and school staff throughout the world.



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