

Hundreds of anti-vaccine mandate protesters rally at New Zealand parliament

Tom Peters
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For nearly a week the New Zealand media has provided wall-to-wall coverage of an ongoing protest against the Labour Party-led government's COVID-19 vaccine mandates and other public health measures.

A so-called "Freedom Convoy" of hundreds of vehicles travelled from across the country and arrived in the capital, Wellington, on February 8. About 300 protesters camped on the lawn outside parliament, and about 250 people were there this morning.

The event was named after a convoy in Canada, linked to far-right forces involved in former US President Donald Trump's attempted coup on January 6, 2021. Similar protests have been held in Australia over the past week and more are being planned by right-wing groups across Europe.

Yesterday, New Zealand parliament's speaker Trevor Mallard instructed hundreds of police to clear the protesters out. Officers were filmed seizing numerous people in the crowd, including one woman who was dragged by her hair. They arrested 122 people for trespassing.

The police intervention was no doubt a trial run for aggressive tactics that will be deployed, far more rapidly, against genuine oppositional protests in the future, including by left-wing groups, students and workers opposed to the pro-business COVID policies that are supported by both the right-wing rabble and the official parties.

The protest is a thoroughly reactionary event. While claiming to stand for "freedom," it demands the removal of all protections against the spread of COVID-19, which the *Economist* estimates has killed more than 14 million people worldwide.

Internationally, the ruling elite is using such protests to create a toxic ideological atmosphere justifying the criminal policies of letting COVID-19 rip, and to shift official politics even further to the right. The

representatives of big business aim to normalise mass infection and unending deaths from the virus, and to abolish lockdowns and all other public health measures that impinge on its "freedom" to extract profits from the working class.

The convoy is backed by various organisations, including Voices for Freedom (VOF), an anti-vax group co-founded by a former member of the short-lived Advance NZ party. VOF has published material opposing booster vaccines, inoculation for children and masks.

Those attending the Wellington rally included prominent anti-vaxxer Sue Grey, leader of the Outdoors Party; the Freedom and Rights Coalition, a front for the fundamentalist Destiny Church; and the New Conservative Party. The last two are well-known for their anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim and anti-LGBT demagoguery.

Others promoting the "Freedom Convoy" included far-right blogger Cameron Slater, the fascist group Action Zealandia, and Counterspin Media. The latter airs on GTV, the media network of US fascist Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's former advisor.

Counterspin's Kelvyn Alp posted a video from outside parliament on Wednesday declaring that the protesters planned to enter parliament and carry out a "citizen's arrest" of politicians.

Participants at the rally waved New Zealand and Maori nationalist flags, and held placards denouncing the government as "communist" and tyrannical, and glorifying the country's military history. One prominent banner carried the anti-scientific message: "Natural immunity 99.6 percent effective."

There were also violent threats. Someone spray-painted a swastika on a statue. Protesters also wrote the words "Hang 'em high" in chalk on parliament's forecourt. A 17-year-old girl passing by a group of protesters was pelted with eggs because she was wearing a mask.

International media coverage falsely presented the New

Zealand convoy as evidence of growing opposition to public health measures. An Associated Press report, published in the *Washington Post* and NPR, declared that “some have grown weary of the restrictions.” The article made no mention of the convoy’s far-right organisers.

Similarly, the *New Zealand Herald’s* right-wing pundit Matthew Hooton, while applauding the police intervention and the arrests of protesters, declared that lockdowns had created “a seething anger towards the Government from a much larger and more reasonable segment of the population.”

In fact, more than 95 percent of NZ’s eligible population has been double-vaccinated. Lockdowns over the past two years were strongly supported and have kept New Zealand’s COVID death toll so far at 53. There is growing concern, including among parents, teachers and healthcare workers, over the Labour-led government’s abandonment of its previous elimination policy and its decision to allow the highly-infectious Omicron variant to spread.

The Ardern government has already abandoned the use of lockdowns to reduce COVID case numbers to zero, which was the main demand of last year’s protests organised by Destiny Church. Ardern has declared that schools and businesses must remain open, despite the escalating spread of Omicron across the country.

The Labour government is also moving to dismantle New Zealand’s border quarantine system, which has kept thousands of COVID cases out of the country.

In response to the “Freedom Convoy,” Ardern told the media that the vaccine mandates would be lifted “when they’re not needed.” Opposition National Party leader Christopher Luxon called for a timeframe for the removal of mandates.

While Ardern and Luxon both made statements criticising the “Freedom Convoy,” it was endorsed by right-wing nationalist NZ First Party leader Winston Peters, who said it represented “legitimately frustrated kiwis.”

NZ First, an anti-immigrant, especially anti-Chinese party, was part of the 2017–2020 coalition government with Labour. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern gave NZ First a major role, making Peters the foreign minister and deputy prime minister, while NZ First’s deputy leader Ron Mark was made defence minister. NZ First received just 2.6 percent of votes in 2020, not enough to re-enter parliament.

The right-wing event also found support from *Redline*, a pseudo-left blog founded by former Maoists and former

Pabloites. The blog’s Don Franks described the protesters as “ordinary working people... stepping outside of their normal day to day life to make a point about something concerning them deeply.” He said nothing about the blatantly right-wing politics of the event.

Redline promotes the Swedish policy of mass infection and “herd immunity” and has also posted articles defending the Canadian “Freedom Convoy”—whose organisers are openly agitating for a coup. The blog represents middle class ex-radicals who are responding to the pandemic and the crisis of capitalism by galloping to the right.

While practically all corporate media commentators criticised the “convoy,” the entire political establishment stands united behind the policy of allowing Omicron to spread and infect masses of people.

The small “Freedom Convoy,” like similar far-right protests internationally, is able to exert an outsized influence on political life due to the absence of a movement of the working class opposing the government from the left. Responsibility for this situation rests with the trade unions, backed by the pseudo-left groups, which are enforcing the Ardern government’s dangerous reopening of schools and businesses.

Working people, as well as students and young people, must take matters into their own hands and urgently organise their own independent opposition to the government’s “let it rip” agenda. The Socialist Equality Group, in an open letter to workers in New Zealand, called for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in schools and workplaces, to organise strikes and protests for a fully-funded, scientific elimination strategy, both in New Zealand and internationally.



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