

# New Zealand right-wing, pseudo-lefts urge government to “engage” with far-right protesters

Tom Peters

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Hundreds of protesters opposed to vaccine mandates are in their 10th day occupying the lawn outside New Zealand’s parliament in Wellington.

The so-called Freedom Convoy, named after the similar occupation of the Canadian capital, is demanding that the Labour Party-led government scrap all remaining public health measures. The highly-infectious Omicron variant of COVID-19 is already spreading rapidly across the country, infecting more than 1,000 people every day, with few restrictions apart from vaccine passes and some mask mandates.

Several far-right groups are involved, including the fundamentalist Destiny Church, the anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim New Conservative Party, and the anti-vaccine groups, Voices for Freedom and NZ Doctors Speaking out with Science. The rally is being promoted by Counterspin Media, which is funded by the media network of US fascist Steve Bannon, the far-right NZ blogger Cameron Slater, and the fascist group Action Zealandia.

“Talk of public executions is common at the protest,” *Stuff* reported. This included a message written in chalk saying “Hang ‘em high.” In the lead-up to the protest, *Counterspin* last month posted an online image of a guillotine in a video segment headlined “Decapitation” time in New Zealand’s capital?”

Workers in the area have been intimidated and abused. A teenage girl was pelted with eggs because she wore a mask. Bus driver Matthew Myers told *Stuff* he was spat on by an anti-vaxxer near parliament.

Despite its small size, the protest has caused significant disruption. Hundreds of vehicles have blocked roads near parliament and forced the closure of several businesses, the National Library and part of Victoria University of Wellington.

After arresting about 120 people for “trespassing” last week, police are now taking a largely hands-off approach, allowing the protest encampment to continue. Police Association president Chris Cahill told Newstalk ZB he expected the protest to last months.

Meanwhile, there are growing calls from parts of the media and political establishment, including pseudo-left commentators, for the government to “engage” with the right-wing rally leaders.

On February 14, the *New Zealand Herald* quoted an unnamed “chief executive of a national hospitality chain” saying Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern should “front up” and “talk to” the protesters because “at the moment they don’t feel they are heard at all—and that’s a problem for us.”

On February 15, opposition National Party leader Christopher Luxon criticised the ongoing occupation, noting the presence of “white supremacists” and “M?ori separatists.” But he added that “it’s representative of an immense amount of frustration that sits in the country around where we are going with our Omicron plan and why we don’t have clarity going forward.” He later told TVNZ there were “some really good people” in the occupation.

ACT Party leader David Seymour, a far-right ally of National, met with unnamed representatives of the convoy on Wednesday, including one he described as a wealthy business owner. Seymour told Radio NZ that despite some “odious expressions” by protesters, “I certainly sympathise with their frustrations with the government’s COVID response.”

ACT and National have called for the much faster removal of COVID-19 restrictions, including the border quarantine system and vaccine mandates.

John Tamihere, a former leader of the pro-business

M?ori Party, backed the protesters' main demand, writing in the *New Zealand Herald* that the government "must declare a time when vaccination mandates will be removed."

The right-wing nationalist NZ First, which was a major part of the Labour-led coalition government from 2017 to 2020, was among the first to declare its support for the convoy. Its leader Winston Peters tweeted that it "represents millions of kiwis." In fact, over 95 percent of eligible New Zealanders are double-vaccinated.

These right-wingers are supported by prominent pseudo-left commentator John Minto, who embraced the protest. In a column printed by *Stuff* and the pro-Labour Party *Daily Blog*, he called it "an expression of frustration and anger at decades of workers struggling at the margins of society" in a country that is "run for the wealthy."

Minto, who supported earlier Destiny Church-led protests on the *Daily Blog*, is well-known for leading anti-apartheid protests in the 1980s. He is a darling of the pseudo-left milieu, which heavily promoted his candidacy for the M?ori nationalist Mana Party from 2011 to 2014.

Liberal politics professor and media pundit Bryce Edwards similarly attempted to sanitise the protest. He told Radio NZ on Tuesday that "some people are scaremongering about the far-right [and] fascists... and it's just not the case."

He described the occupiers as "poor people, mostly brown," concerned about inequality, but susceptible to misinformation. Echoing ACT and National, Edwards called for Deputy Prime Minister Grant Robertson to talk to the protesters and "give a date" for getting rid of vaccine mandates. Edwards was invited onto a panel discussion hosted by the *Daily Blog*, where he repeated this basic message.

Edwards, Minto and the pseudo-left *Redline* blog, which hails the New Zealand and Canadian events as a "populist revival," have all either downplayed or treated as irrelevant the fact that the convoy was organised and promoted by ultra-conservatives, including the Christian right, and outright fascists.

These middle-class commentators are lurching to the right in response to the crisis triggered by the pandemic. They are seeking to disarm the working class in the face of the extreme right, which, despite its small size, is largely setting the agenda for the government's COVID response.

The protesters' demands are essentially those of the business elite: the deadly virus must be normalised and allowed to become "endemic," i.e., to kill millions more

people worldwide, and to go on mutating into even more infectious variants.

Prime Minister Ardern told the media that the protesters are "not representative of the vast bulk of New Zealanders." Government ministers have been meeting today to discuss their response to the protest, and the Defence Force could reportedly be called in to remove vehicles.

However, the Labour government and its allies, including the Greens, and the trade unions, insist that the population must "live with" the virus. Ardern falsely claims that elimination is no longer possible, despite this policy being successfully implemented in China, a country with more than a billion people.

The government has already adopted the main demand put forward by Destiny Church, ACT and National last year for an end to lockdowns. Big business views such measures, essential for controlling and suppressing the virus, as an unacceptable attack on its "right" to extract profits from the working class.

In response to Omicron, more restrictions are being removed: the isolation period for positive COVID cases has been shortened, and the border quarantine system is about to be dismantled.

The government says tens of thousands of people will come into contact with Omicron in the coming weeks. Already, there have been outbreaks in several schools, a South Auckland prison, and in Auckland's Starship Children's Hospital.

None of this could happen without the assistance of the trade unions, which have suppressed any opposition from working people to the "let it rip" policy. The unions enforced the reopening of schools this month, and are keeping non-essential businesses operating, placing millions of workers in danger.

To defeat the far-right agenda of mass infection, the working class must build a new party, based on socialism and internationalism, and rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace. We urge readers to read and share the Socialist Equality Group's openletter to workers in New Zealand, and to contact us and discuss these burning political issues.



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