

# Police break up anti-vaccination camp at New Zealand parliament

Tom Peters  
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Yesterday, police brought an end to the 23-day occupation of the lawn and streets outside New Zealand's parliament by a few hundred anti-vaccine mandate protesters.

In an operation that began at 6:00am and lasted about 12 hours, hundreds of riot police surrounded the protesters and gradually forced their encampment off the lawn. As police moved in during the afternoon, fires were lit, destroying many tents and a children's playground.

Sections of the protest attempted to incite violence. Numerous videos show people throwing chairs and other flammable items onto the fires and deliberately starting new ones. Part of the nearby Victoria University of Wellington Business School was vandalised and there was reportedly an arson attempt at the Law School.

Police used pepper spray, hoses and rubber bullets, and were filmed punching protesters, some of whom threw bricks and other objects at the cops. Seven officers were reportedly injured, and an unknown number of protesters. Police arrested 87 people.

The protest began as a "convoy" that converged on Wellington on February 8, inspired by a right-wing convoy that occupied Ottawa in Canada. Two days later, police arrested 122 people for "trespassing" in an initial attempt to clear parliament grounds. However, many of these people soon returned along with others, and police stood back while the occupation became entrenched and hundreds of vehicles blockaded nearby streets.

The occupiers' harassment of the public, and the health risk they posed (at least three protesters were hospitalised for COVID), forced the closure of businesses, the National Library, two schools and part of the university.

The protest was backed by numerous far-right groups, including the Christian New Conservative Party, the fundamentalist Destiny Church front group, the Freedom and Rights Coalition, the Outdoors and Freedom Party and the anti-vaccination groups Voices for Freedom and

NZ Doctors Speaking Out with Science.

Support came from the reactionary blogger Cameron Slater, Counterspin Media, which is backed by the American fascist Steve Bannon, and the fascist group Action Zealandia. Counterspin has recently spread the conspiracy theory that the 2019 Christchurch terror attack, which killed 51 Muslims, was a "false flag." Action Zealandia promotes the racist ideology of terrorist Brenton Tarrant.

The convoy organisers have denounced the government's public health policies as "tyranny," "communism," Nazism, "globalism" and "genocide." Throughout the occupation there were numerous calls for politicians to be arrested and publicly executed.

Yesterday, as police faced off against the crowd on Molesworth Street, one protester gave a speech saying: "It's time to accept that the pandemic is over, that every single one of us is going to get this virus... and that we've got to live with it." He called Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern a "Marxist... in the pay of Bill Gates and the WEF [World Economic Forum]."

This reactionary mob, with fewer than 1,000 participants, was allowed to blockade parliament and the surrounding area for weeks, because its central demand for the population to "live with" the virus, aligned with the needs of the New Zealand business elite.

The rally received unprecedented media coverage, and was used by sections of the political establishment to pressure the government to dismantle public health measures. The occupation was brought to an end after it had largely fulfilled its purpose of shifting official politics further to the right.

Opposition National Party leader Christopher Luxon repeatedly expressed sympathy for the protesters, claiming that they represented broader frustration with COVID restrictions. Far-right ACT Party leader David Seymour held a meeting with representatives of the

occupation. Former Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, from the right-wing nationalist NZ First, visited the encampment, which he claimed was representative of ordinary people.

Pseudo-left commentator John Minto, liberal columnist Bryce Edwards, and the *Redline* blog depicted the protesters as ordinary “working class” people, while downplaying or ignoring the right-wing organisers.

In fact, the anti-vaccination groups represent a tiny minority. There is mass support for vaccines, with more than 96 percent of those eligible having received two doses. More than 142,000 people signed an online petition calling for the occupiers to “go home.”

Ardern yesterday told a press conference that New Zealand “will not be defined by a small handful of protesters.” She said thousands of lives had been saved during the pandemic because of people’s adherence to public health measures.

Ardern’s Labour Party-led government, however, has largely abandoned restrictions after ending its elimination policy last October. It has allowed the Omicron variant to spread out of control, placing tremendous pressure on healthcare services. More than 146,000 people are now infected with COVID and 503 are in hospital.

The far-right is setting the agenda for the Labour government, which has already implemented many of the demands made by Destiny Church, the opposition parties and business groups. With the crucial assistance of the trade unions, the government has ended lockdowns, vowed to keep schools and businesses open, and is removing border quarantine requirements. Last week, the government changed the definition of a “contact” so that far fewer people will be required to self-isolate if they come into contact with a COVID case.

While Ardern portrayed the country as united, the government is terrified of a confrontation with the working class, which is moving to the left under the impact of the pandemic and soaring social inequality. The government’s healthcare authorities have applied to the Employment Court to stop a nationwide strike scheduled for tomorrow by 10,000 public healthcare workers against low wages and drastic under-resourcing.

The government is already signalling that it will exploit the far-right protest to curtail democratic rights. The Speaker of Parliament Trevor Mallard tweeted, “I think we will have to have a wall” with gates to control public access to parliament’s grounds. The site is a major focal point for strikes and protests.

The use of rubber bullets against protesters also sets a

new precedent. These weapons, which can inflict severe injuries, were introduced in New Zealand in 2015 for special groups of police. In June 2020, Police Commissioner Andrew Coster spoke about expanding their use by frontline officers, but told Radio NZ there were “no immediate plans” to do so. His comments followed worldwide protests, including in New Zealand, sparked by the police murder of George Floyd and a wave of police violence in the United States.

The government will also use the events at parliament to justify greater powers to censor online “extremism.” Deputy Prime Minister Grant Robertson told Radio NZ, “there’s a responsibility for all of us to look at how we can stop the spread of dis- and misinformation.” Already, since the Christchurch terror attack, Labour has introduced legislation to make it easier to take down social media content, and drawn up laws against “hate speech.”

The target of all these measures is not the extreme right, but the working class. The government is anticipating a surge in strikes and protests in opposition to the unending attacks on living conditions, the disaster created by unleashing Omicron, and the preparations for war with Russia and China.

Many workers and young people are rightly disturbed by the scenes at parliament. The danger of fascism, however, cannot be countered by relying on the capitalist state and the Ardern government, which has emboldened these forces through its policies. The working class needs its own party, opposed to Labour and its allies, from the standpoint of a socialist and internationalist perspective.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers and young people to establish rank-and-file safety committees in schools and workplaces to fight for the elimination of COVID-19, independently of the trade unions, which enforced Labour’s unsafe reopening of schools and non-essential businesses. We encourage readers to contact us to discuss this perspective.



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