

Three years since the Christchurch terror attack

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Wednesday marked three years since the March 15, 2019, terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand. Fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant murdered 51 men, women and children at two mosques, and injured nearly 50 more. The attack, driven by racism and anti-Muslim hatred, was streamed on video over the internet by Tarrant.

The horrific event, the largest mass shooting in New Zealand history, provoked widespread shock. Mass vigils were held in New Zealand and other countries in solidarity with the victims and their families, and in opposition to racism and bigotry.

To mark the third anniversary, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern moved a parliamentary motion to recognise the victims and “reassert the promise we made as a House to protect Muslim New Zealanders and their right to be safe from fear.”

She declared that the Labour Party-Greens coalition government had “made substantial progress” towards addressing “the underlying causes of terrorism and violent extremism,” without providing any evidence to back this up.

Internationally, the danger posed by the far-right is growing. Extreme right wing and fascist supporters of Donald Trump, who Tarrant admired as a “symbol of white renewal,” attempted a violent coup in Washington on January 6, 2021. At present, the US and its allies are backing fascist militias as part of the war against Russia in Ukraine.

The extreme-right is playing a leading role in rallies against COVID-19 public health restrictions, including in Australia and New Zealand.

The Ardern government’s main response to the Christchurch terror attack has been to strengthen the powers of the state. Ardern referred to legislation which removed 61,000 firearms from the community, and the “Christchurch Call” initiative, launched in collaboration with France and several other governments, ostensibly “to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online.”

Green Party MP Golriz Ghahraman also spoke in parliament, blaming the attack on online “hate speech,” and demanding stronger hate speech laws. The government has

delayed a plan to introduce such laws, clearly concerned about public opposition.

As the crisis of capitalism deepens, internet censorship and “hate speech” laws will be used against working-class opposition to social inequality, militarism, and the criminal policies that have allowed COVID-19 to spread.

What counts as “extremism” will likewise be determined by the state. The French government and others supporting the Christchurch Call, such as the US, Hungary, India and Sri Lanka, routinely promote anti-Muslim chauvinism to divert social tensions, in the name of combating “extremism.”

The response of the Ardern government has been to use the massacre to censor freedom of speech of the population as a whole and to throw a veil of secrecy and silence around Tarrant’s methods, contacts and links prior to the attack.

Three years after the Christchurch attack, there are many unanswered questions about how Tarrant was able to plan and carry out his massacre. There were warnings made about Tarrant, including a report to Australian police of a death threat he sent online in 2016, and a report to New Zealand police about violent comments made by members of his gun club in Otago.

A royal commission of inquiry in 2020 whitewashed the actions of police. The commissioners asserted that the state agencies could not have done anything to prevent the terror attack. The inquiry was held behind closed doors and the evidence it examined has been kept secret, including interviews with police, intelligence officials and Tarrant himself.

The royal commission also covered up the role of successive New Zealand and Australian governments in fostering anti-Muslim sentiment by joining the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A Coroner’s inquiry into the attack, the first public inquiry, began last month. At an initial hearing, lawyers for many of the victims’ families, and representatives of Muslim organisations, noted that they were shut out of the royal commission process. They raised questions about

Tarrant's connections to far-right groups internationally, how he had obtained a gun licence in New Zealand, why his online activity had not been detected, why he was not arrested sooner in his shooting rampage, and whether he had any accomplices.

The Australian government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison greeted the third anniversary of the Christchurch attack with total silence, despite Tarrant's connections with the Australian neo-Nazi United Patriots Front and the Lads Society, which tried to recruit him. It remains unclear what these groups knew about his plans.

Research from Charles Sturt University has documented ongoing threats and attacks on Muslims. The "Islamophobia in Australia" report, released on the anniversary of the Christchurch attack, pointed to 247 verified incidents in 2018 and 2019, 138 physical and 109 online. This included vandalism of mosques, and harassment and physical attacks, mostly against Muslim women.

Report author Derya Iner wrote in the *Conversation*: "Incidents occurred in places including shopping centres, public transport, pools and playgrounds and education settings. This suggests there is no public space that is safe from Islamophobia."

There was a fourfold spike in incidents of anti-Muslim hate following the Christchurch attack, and an 18-fold increase in online incidents, including posts glorifying the shooter and calling for more violence.

Despite Ardern's claims of "substantial progress" in tackling far-right extremism, the situation is not fundamentally different in New Zealand. The Islamic Women's Council's (IWC) national coordinator Aliya Danzeisen told Radio NZ they had seen increased extremism online and in-person. She pointed to a recent assault by two teenagers on a Muslim schoolgirl in Dunedin.

The IWC also noted that far-right elements were involved in the three-week-long anti-vaccination protest outside parliament in Wellington. The anti-immigrant New Conservative Party and Destiny Church were among the organisers, and the event was promoted by the *Counterspin* media outlet funded by US fascist Steve Bannon.

Destiny Church notoriously responded to the Christchurch massacre by holding an anti-Muslim protest in the city, while *Counterspin* has promoted the conspiracy theory that the attack was a "false flag."

The Wellington protesters' demands—to remove all public health restrictions that impede profit-making, and normalise the spread of COVID-19—received support from sections of the media and the opposition National Party, the ACT Party and the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party.

The Ardern government is implementing the right-wingers' agenda. It has promised there will be no more

lockdowns and has allowed hundreds of thousands of people to become infected.

The Australian and New Zealand governments' support for the US and NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine will further embolden the far-right. Both countries have imposed sanctions against Russia, and Canberra has committed \$70 million to "lethal aid" for Ukraine's armed forces. Powerful fascist militias, such as the Azov battalion, are integrated into Ukraine's military and have received weapons and training from NATO.

Tarrant visited Ukraine in 2015, one year after the US supported a fascist-led coup, which toppled a pro-Russian government and sparked a civil war. Tarrant reportedly told his family that he enjoyed his time in Ukraine so much he wanted to live there.

According to the royal commission's report, this alarmed Tarrant's mother. She "emailed [her son] an article about extreme right-wing groups in Ukraine that groomed young men like him and she pleaded for him to come home to Australia. He never responded."

In his manifesto, Tarrant, who travelled extensively in Europe, pointed out that the continent's militaries include many far-right nationalists. The manifesto also revealed his support for Trump and the similarity of his racist views to those of far-right parties like NZ First and One Nation in Australia. Possession of the document was banned by New Zealand's chief censor—an anti-democratic action aimed at curtailing public discussion of these issues.

Russians in New Zealand are now facing demonisation and abuse, which recalls the treatment endured by Muslims. TVNZ reported on March 9 that "a Russian Orthodox church was vandalised, a business in Christchurch had its window defaced, a Russian singer has had shows cancelled, and children have been bullied, made to feel ashamed of their cultural heritage."

While the far-right forces do not have mass support, they are being promoted by the ruling class in every country. The aim is to divert working-class anger over rising social inequality by whipping up nationalism and xenophobia, and to intimidate opponents of war and the "let it rip" approach to COVID-19.

The working class, in New Zealand and internationally, must respond by taking up the fight for socialism, to put an end to capitalism, which is the source of war, inequality, and nationalism.



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