

New Zealand PM in the US promotes internet censorship, downplays pandemic

Tom Peters
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New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern is in the middle of a two-week visit to the United States, with the stated aim of boosting trade and tourism, after NZ ditched almost all its COVID-19 restrictions and reopened the border.

Ardern is accompanied by Trade Minister Damien O'Connor and representatives from major NZ companies including dairy exporter Fonterra, meat processor Silver Fern Farms, and kiwifruit exporter Zespri.

In a press release, Ardern made clear that the US relationship “is fundamental to us in political and security terms too.” She will meet President Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris on Tuesday, and they will discuss New Zealand’s role in the US-NATO war against Russia, and in the growing preparations for war against China.

It is Ardern’s second overseas trip since the pandemic began. Last month, she visited Japan, where she signed an intelligence-sharing agreement, helping to bring Japan into closer alignment with the US-led Five Eyes spy network.

Ardern’s US visit has been overshadowed by the mass shootings in Buffalo and Uvalde. In response to these horrific events, she echoed the banal statements of Biden and other politicians, which are aimed at preventing any serious discussion of their underlying social and political causes.

In her commencement address to Harvard University graduates last Thursday, and during an earlier appearance on the “Late Show,” Ardern was applauded for mentioning New Zealand’s “gun control” measures. The country’s parliament banned military-style assault rifles following the March 15, 2019 terror attack, in which fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant killed 51 people at two Christchurch mosques.

In her Harvard speech, Ardern said nothing about the role of far-right politicians, including Donald Trump, in fuelling Tarrant’s ideology. Instead, she blamed the attack on social media and promoted her government’s push for global internet censorship, dubbed the Christchurch Call to Action.

Ardern lamented the declining influence of “mainstream media outlets,” that is, those which serve corporate interests, and urged social media companies to work with governments to develop “responsible algorithms” to stop “disinformation.”

What this means in practice can be seen in New Zealand, where the Labour Party-led government has already boosted the powers and resources of the Office of the Censor to rapidly take down online content deemed “extremist.” The real target of such measures is not the far-right, but working people, who are moving to the left.

New Zealand, like the US, is seething with class tensions. Ardern portrayed the country as a sort of identity politics paradise, telling her privileged audience: “Almost 50 percent of our parliament are women, 20 percent are Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, and our deputy prime minister is a proud gay man.”

She did not mention that her “diverse” Labour-Greens coalition government has used the pandemic to engineer the biggest transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich in New Zealand’s history. Tens of billions of dollars have been handed to corporations and the banks, while real wages are going backwards amid the soaring cost of living. Nearly one in four children lives in poverty, while homelessness and reliance on charity are at record levels.

Workers are seeking a means to fight back, with a nationwide strike by 10,000 healthcare workers held

earlier this month. Low-paid hospital workers face chronic staff shortages, made worse by the constant stream of sick and dying COVID-19 patients.

The New Zealand government is now following the US and other countries in removing all public health restrictions and allowing COVID to infect millions of people. While visiting the US, where hundreds are dying from the virus every day, Ardern promoted the lie that the pandemic is over, as she encouraged tourists to return to New Zealand.

In an interview which was basically an advertorial for New Zealand, “Late Show” host Stephen Colbert congratulated Ardern on the country’s relatively low COVID death toll of more than 1,000 people in a country of five million. Ardern explained that this was because “we decided that we would try and eliminate, just get rid of COVID,” using lockdowns and border quarantine measures.

Ardern said New Zealand had adopted this policy because “we just couldn’t stand the idea of our population being devastated when we could do something about it... It was the right thing to do, it saved so many lives.” She said the border had remained closed “for the entirety of the pandemic,” implying that the restrictions are being lifted now because the pandemic is over.

Ardern’s presentation was false from start to finish. Her Labour Party-led government, supported by the nurses’ and teachers’ unions, initially opposed a nationwide lockdown. The measure was announced in late March 2020, not out of altruism, but because the ruling class feared a mass movement developing among tens of thousands of healthcare workers and others, who were demanding action to stop the virus.

Ardern failed to mention that New Zealand’s elimination policy was abandoned last October, against the advice of public health experts, and that the Omicron variant has spread like wildfire. Following the instructions of the corporate and financial elite, which is totally unconcerned about protecting lives and views all public health measures as a barrier to profit-making, the NZ government has embraced the criminal policy of mass infection.

Quarantine-free travel is resuming just as New Zealand is in the middle of a deadly surge, which is expected to get worse as the country heads into winter. The vast majority of the more than 1,100 COVID-

related deaths happened in the last three months, following the reopening of schools for in-person learning.

According to Worldometers, New Zealand recorded 20 COVID deaths per million in the past seven days, the eighth-highest weekly death rate in the world. More than one million people in the country have been infected, meaning there could be hundreds of thousands suffering from Long COVID.

Seeking to minimise the danger posed by the virus, Ardern joked with Colbert about her own recent infection, saying she got COVID “for Mother’s Day” from her partner, and she did not recommend it as a gift.

The virus has, however, disrupted Ardern’s US trip. So far, three members of her delegation have tested positive, including Ministry of Foreign Affairs chief Chris Seed and Ardern’s chief press secretary Andrew Campbell. California Governor Gavin Newsom also revealed he had tested positive the day after meeting Ardern in San Francisco.

Despite this spate of infections, Ardern’s meeting with Biden is still scheduled to go ahead. As the world hurtles towards war, Ardern told the media that she would encourage greater US “engagement” in the Pacific region. This is meant to push back against China’s growing influence and to defend the NZ ruling class’s own interests in its neo-colonial patch.



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