

New Zealand: Change of police minister signals shift to the right

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On June 13, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced changes to a number of ministerial roles which signal a further shift to the right by the Labour Party-led government. New ministers have been installed in the police, justice and immigration portfolios, and the parliament's speaker will also be replaced.

The most significant change is the demotion of Poto Williams, who will lose her job as minister of police, to be replaced by senior minister Chris Hipkins. Ardern declared that “the focus on the portfolio and where it needs to be has been lost in recent times” and “we need to get back to basics.” The move portends a more openly hardline “law and order” stance.

The Ardern government is presiding over record levels of social inequality, soaring inflation, and a mounting death toll from the COVID-19 pandemic. As in every other country, the ruling class is responding to the worsening crisis by strengthening the repressive powers of the state, in preparation to confront opposition from the working class.

Williams, whose family is from the Cook Islands, worked in the disability and family violence sector prior to entering parliament in 2013. She was made police minister after Labour was re-elected in 2020 in an effort to repair the image of the police, following widespread opposition to plans to give officers more access to guns, and protests over the police murder of George Floyd in the US and police brutality and racism in New Zealand.

While the government claimed it was addressing concerns about police “culture,” and has hired more female and ethnically diverse officers, nothing fundamental has changed. So far this year there have been two fatal shootings by police, including one of an unarmed 22-year-old man in Taranaki. In March, Radio

NZ reported that “New Zealand police kill at 11 times the rate of police in England and Wales.”

Ardern, however, claimed that the “environment” had changed since the “controversy” surrounding armed police in 2020. She noted that the police budget has increased by 35 percent and police numbers by 15 percent since Williams was appointed. “The focus has changed and with it we’ve changed the ministerial lineup,” she said. The new minister will oversee “record investment in the front line” and “deal with the current escalation in gang tensions and violence” and “youth offending.”

For several weeks, the media and opposition parties have attacked the government for failing to address gang-related violence and “ram raid” robberies by young people. Recent headlines refer to a “fortnight of fear,” a “sense of lawlessness” and a “youth crime wave” in Auckland, the country’s biggest city.

On June 8, opposition National Party leader Christopher Luxon told *Newshub* that Williams “needs to be removed by the prime minister and replaced with someone else... She isn’t providing the leadership, she’s not been getting the tools and the frontline police don’t feel backed up.”

National has demanded a major increase in police powers, including for officers to have greater access to guns, more powers to search purported gangs’ premises and vehicles without a warrant, and to stop alleged gang members associating with each other. The party also wants to ban gang “patches and insignia” from being displayed in public and on social media. Such measures would be a major attack on freedom of association and freedom of expression.

Ardern told Radio NZ she would not implement National’s “reactionary” proposals. She added, however, that her government has asked police to

identify what additional “tools” they need to “come down hard” on the gangs.

Notwithstanding the recent media focus on youth crime, it has declined over the last decade. Ministry of Justice figures show that offending by children aged 10–13 and young people aged 14–16 dropped by 65 and 63 percent respectively between 2011 and 2021. The country’s prison population has also fallen from 10,820 in March 2018 to 7,669 four years later.

The media coverage deliberately obscures the fact that recent ram raids and shootings involve a minuscule proportion of young people.

The hysteria is also directed against any understanding of the relationships between crime, gang membership and the social crisis, which is the responsibility of the current Labour government and all of the administrations that preceded it.

In areas such as South Auckland there is deeply entrenched poverty, impacting more than one in four children. According to Auckland Council, one in three young people experience “housing deprivation,” i.e. unstable, unhealthy or overcrowded housing. South Auckland is also one of the areas worst-affected by COVID-19, with the local Middlemore Hospital overrun with cases.

Across the country, there is growing despair and alienation, compounded by the lack of healthcare and social services. According to TVNZ, police “received just under 30,000 calls last year alone” for “threatened or attempted suicides,” an increase of 87 percent compared with 2015.

The government, far from addressing the social breakdown, has used the pandemic to hand over tens of billions of dollars to the rich, exacerbating the inflationary crisis and the housing bubble. Now, it is boosting the police to deal with the fallout from its austerity policies and plummeting real wages.

Williams’ replacement, Chris Hipkins, has yet to announce specific policy changes as police minister. But he has already gained a reputation for ruthlessness in his roles as education minister and COVID-19 response minister. Hipkins has overseen the lifting of public health restrictions and the unsafe reopening of schools and businesses after the government ditched its previous Zero-COVID policy last October. The change was driven by the demands of the business elite, which views public health measures as a drain on profits, and

enforced by the corporatist trade unions.

This year, the Omicron variant has spread rapidly across the country, infecting well over a million people—more than one fifth of the population. Hospitals are inundated, and around 10 people are dying with the virus every day.

The COVID-19 portfolio has been handed to Dr Ayesha Verrall, formerly the associate minister. Ardern told the media that the job was less demanding because “we are now very much in a steady management of the pandemic.” She added that the pandemic “is not over,” but the government acts as though it is: it has ended the use of lockdowns and border quarantine measures, and scrapped vaccine mandates.

The normalisation of mass infection and death is underscored by the resignation of Trevor Mallard as parliament’s Speaker, also announced by Ardern on June 13. He will be replaced by the relatively unknown MP Adrian Rurawhe.

For months, the opposition National and ACT parties have demanded Mallard’s resignation and attacked his hardline response to anti-vaccination protesters who occupied parliament’s lawn earlier this year. Mallard called in the police to clear out the protesters, and issued trespass notices to a number of former MPs who visited the occupation site. The Labour government, having adopted the main demands of the right-wing protesters for an end to public health measures, wants to put an end to any discussion of the issue.

The worsening healthcare crisis, however, cannot be swept under the rug, any more than the soaring cost of living. As is taking place internationally, these developments will drive workers in New Zealand into struggle against the Ardern government’s pro-business agenda.



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