

Greetings from the ICFI to the SEP (US) 2022 Congress

# The fight against mass COVID infection and militarism in New Zealand

Tom Peters  
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*These remarks were delivered by Tom Peters to the Seventh National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (US), held from July 31 to August 5, 2022.*

*Peters is the leading member of the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand, which is in political solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International.*

*Read the full report on the Congress and the resolutions adopted at it.*

I'm very pleased to be able to attend this extremely important Congress, and to bring greetings from the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand.

I strongly support the resolutions that have been presented here, which as comrades have said are all international documents. On every issue that has been discussed—the pandemic, the fight against war and the danger of fascism—there is no other tendency anywhere in the world that is capable of analysing this global crisis, let alone of putting forward a perspective to lead the working class in the revolutionary struggles that are now starting to emerge.

Our movement has prepared for this over decades, through the struggle to uphold the program of Trotskyism in opposition to all the petty bourgeois revisionist tendencies. I strongly agree with the emphasis that comrades have placed on the fundamental importance of the assimilation of this history in every section of the ICFI, and for groups such as ours that are seeking to build new sections.

We can and must work out practical initiatives to reach workers and to make our program accessible to them, as mass struggles develop, without adapting to the spontaneous consciousness of workers, who have been barred from access to socialist politics and are bombarded with all forms of nationalist and bourgeois ideology. Our task is to raise the political, historical, and cultural level of the working class, and to educate its most advanced layers in the principles and history of Trotskyism.

Herein lies the immense significance of the intransigent struggle waged by comrade Wijie Dias under the most

challenging conditions, against the reactionary, nationalist and racist tendencies that were fostered in Sri Lanka by the betrayal carried out by Pabloism. On behalf of the Socialist Equality Group, I want to convey our profound condolences to the comrades in Sri Lanka for this loss. The fight that the RCL and the SEP continue to build the revolutionary leadership for the workers and rural masses will serve as a powerful example for the working class throughout Asia and internationally, including in this country.

The situation in New Zealand and Australia, as comrades have already alluded to, has rapidly deteriorated over the last five to six months. What has unfolded here vindicates the perspective outlined in the first resolution to this congress: “The fight to end the pandemic requires the organisation and coordination of the struggles of the working class on a world scale, which will only develop through the building of the IWA-RFC.” There is no other way.

Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party government was glorified early in the pandemic for keeping Covid out of the country almost entirely—many illusions were generated on this basis, including in the US and Europe—that if only you have the right leadership in place, the pandemic can be controlled without overthrowing capitalism.

We always warned against such illusions and made the point that Ardern's policy of elimination had been enacted out of immense fear of a mass movement developing among healthcare workers and teachers, who had held nationwide strikes in 2018 and 2019. We pointed to the pressure that was brought to bear on the government, very early in the pandemic, from the corporate media and big business, to lift the restrictions. We also made the point that the pandemic was being used to transfer enormous sums of money to the rich, while the healthcare system was starved of funds.

Nonetheless, the government maintained an elimination strategy and Labour was re-elected at the end of 2020 with a sweeping victory mainly because of this policy.

Last October, Ardern announced that the zero Covid

policy was no longer feasible because Delta was too transmissible. She declared that elimination wasn't necessary anyway because of vaccines. These lies were used to justify the dismantling of border quarantine measures, and an end to lockdowns.

The criminality of this decision, dictated very directly by the banks and financial elite, cannot be overstated. The country was almost free from Covid, but after Ardern's announcement a very small outbreak in Auckland, that could have been completely suppressed, was instead deliberately allowed to spread nationwide. This year, the Omicron variants have infected more than half the population, and the death toll has gone from just 60 people in January to more than 2000 today. This is in a country with 5 million people, so about half that of Michigan.

With a daily average of 19.1 deaths, New Zealand currently has the fourth highest death rate in the world, after Greece, Barbados and the Isle of Man, according to the New York Times' dashboard.

This dramatic change has come as a shock to many people. Hospitals are overwhelmed, placing thousands of patients at risk every day. Groups of doctors have written to the government pleading for better public health measures. There have also been strikes by thousands of healthcare workers, although this movement is still in its initial stages.

None of this has swayed the government which has embraced the "let it rip" policy and the key demands of far-right protesters for an end to vaccine mandates and an end to mask mandates in schools. There is no longer any pretence of seeking to stop or even to mitigate transmission of the virus.

As your resolution states, "From the beginning, the ICFI insisted that the pandemic was not simply a medical issue, but primarily a political, social and economic crisis arising from the broader world capitalist crisis." Public health experts who previously advocated elimination have either been sidelined and ignored or have adapted themselves to the government's new policy.

We are now the only political tendency here that advocates a zero Covid policy and calls on the working class to fight for it. The pseudo-lefts that support the Labour Party and the Green Party have made limited criticisms of the speed with which restrictions have been lifted. The trade unions have enforced the reopening of schools and workplaces.

The education unions have played perhaps the most blatantly criminal role. They opposed the lockdown in 2020 to begin with, and now since the reopening of schools they are repeating the lies about schools being safe for children when they are clearly central to the spread of COVID.

The public health crisis, combined with inflation that is driving down wages, is pushing workers to the left, but this

finds no expression in any of the established organisations.

Likewise, outside of our movement, there is no opposition to the developing Third World War. The Labour government has integrated New Zealand into the conflict against Russia by sending troops to Europe to assist NATO with training Ukrainian forces. New Zealand is also joining the imperialist build-up in the Indo-Pacific region in preparation for war against China.

As is the case internationally, there is growing recognition that the Trotskyist movement represents the only real opposition to militarism.

On April 29 we responded to an attack on us by the Daily Blog, which is an eclectic liberal, nationalist publication that has links with the trade unions and supports the Labour government. Its editor Martyn Bradbury could perhaps be described as the New Zealand equivalent of Jimmy Dore.

The blog has repeatedly promoted the far-right conspiracy theory that the coronavirus leaked from a laboratory in Wuhan. He routinely denounces China for genocide and calls for New Zealand to double its military spending to prepare for war, and for major cuts to immigration and attacks on the rights of migrants.

In a reactionary tirade, he called on the intelligence agencies to "openly investigate Socialist Equality Group as Chinese enablers and for possible treason."

These ex-left forces are playing a major role in seeking to whip up a climate of nationalist hysteria and warmongering.

The ruling class is highly conscious of the attractive power that the ICFI can and will have, and it is preparing accordingly. The movement towards anti-democratic forms of rule, which comrades have been discussing today, is an international phenomenon.

In a revealing interview recently the foreign minister Nanaia Mahuta was asked to comment on the "lessons" of the Sri Lankan uprising for the Pacific region. She made clear that the government is anticipating similar "civil unrest" in the oppressed and hugely indebted countries throughout the region, and if this happens, New Zealand's military is "ready and willing to respond very quickly."

So I very much agree with the emphasis that the resolutions and discussion have placed on the significance of our party and on the necessity to establish a section of this World Party as the only party capable of providing revolutionary leadership in the working class in every country.



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