

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

New Zealand ruling class prepares for war and social unrest

Tom Peters

7 November 2022

These remarks were delivered by Tom Peters to the Sixth National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia), held from September 24 to 27, 2022.

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

I'm very pleased to deliver greetings to this congress from the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand. I strongly support the four resolutions. Taken together, they provide both a powerful analysis of the emerging revolutionary situation, and a guide for the practical political work that the Trotskyist movement must undertake—in Australia and internationally.

The worsening pandemic, the inflationary crisis, the eruption of war are all aspects of the breakdown of capitalism, which extends to every corner of the world and is shattering the myths of national exceptionalism, both in Australia and New Zealand. Only the movement of the working class, armed with the socialist program of the ICFI, can prevent a catastrophe by putting an end to capitalism.

As we began this congress, PM Jacinda Ardern delivered a speech to the UN General Assembly. With shameless hypocrisy, she denounced Russia for threatening to use nuclear weapons, and called on countries to commit to nuclear disarmament and the prohibition of nuclear weaponry.

Ardern's Labour government, which includes the Greens, has integrated New Zealand more closely than ever into the operations of US imperialism. New Zealand has joined numerous war games in the Asia-Pacific region and has repeated Washington's denunciations of both Russia and China as the major threats facing the world order.

As your resolution "Build an international movement of the working class against imperialist war!" states, Australia and New Zealand play a key role in the preparations for war against China in the Pacific. When the AUKUS agreement was announced, which includes supplying nuclear submarines to Australia, Ardern said "we welcome the increased engagement of the UK and US in the region."

New Zealand is also increasingly involved in the war against Russia; Ardern has sent over 200 troops to Britain to assist in training the Ukrainian armed forces. This is more New Zealand soldiers than were ever stationed in Iraq or Afghanistan over the past twenty years. The government is now considering whether to expel the Russian ambassador—something demanded by both the right-wing opposition parties and by the Green Party.

The decision to join what is the opening stage of World War III was made behind the backs of the population and accompanied by a barrage of anti-Russia and anti-Chinese propaganda. This is being spearheaded by the pseudo-left supporters of the Labour government, whose alignment with US imperialism is completely undisguised.

The International Socialist Organisation in New Zealand published an

article on March 8 which glorified the Zelensky regime and stated that Ukraine must join NATO, because "to deny [it the right] to choose its own security arrangements and foreign policy is to make concessions to Russian imperialism."

This illustrates the point made in the resolution, that the designation of Russia and China as imperialist, which cannot be justified by any objective analysis, "has a very definite political purpose... to minimise or cover up completely the central role of US imperialism in instigating a Third World War." According to the ISO, to oppose the expansion of NATO and US imperialism is to make impermissible concessions to Russian "imperialism."

The pseudo-lefts speak for an entire upper middle-class milieu which is lurching to the right in lockstep with the Labour government.

Another example is the *Daily Blog*, which publishes articles by various ex-lefts, union officials and Labour supporters. Over the past two years its editor Martyn Bradbury has demonised China, echoing the fascist lie that the coronavirus was leaked from a laboratory in Wuhan, and called for the surveillance of Chinese people in NZ and for a vast increase in military spending to prepare for war. His writings have taken on an ever more provocative far-right character: last November, for example, he defended the fascist Kyle Rittenhouse who murdered two people during Black Lives Matter protests in the US in 2020.

Most significantly, the blog has attacked the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Group, in response to our exposure of its pro-war positions. In September last year, the blog denounced us as "sectarian." Then, in April this year, Bradbury accused the SEG of "craven China worship" and called for the SIS intelligence agency to "openly investigate [us] as Chinese enablers and for possible treason."

As we wrote, this reflects discussions taking place in the political establishment, with which Bradbury has close connections. Here, as in Australia, Germany and internationally, they recognise that the ICFI is the only political tendency opposing the imperialist war drive—and that our program has the potential to intersect with deeply held anti-war sentiments in the working class.

As the resolution explains, our opposition to war is based not on futile pacifist appeals, but on the mobilisation of the international working class against capitalism. Only our movement strives "to imbue the working class with the understanding that its immediate struggles to defend wages and conditions are inexorably bound up with a unified political fight against imperialist war and for the abolition of capitalism."

We are living in a period of wars and revolutions, and as much as the pseudo-left seeks to deny it, this is not some distant prospect which only the Trotskyist movement is talking about. Scott Morrison stated that he had to secretly adopt potentially dictatorial powers at the start of the pandemic because Australia faced its "biggest crisis outside of wartime"

and there was “the prospect of civil disruption, extensive fatalities and economic collapse.”

Politicians in New Zealand have expressed the same basic fears. Last November, former National Party PM Jim Bolger warned during a TVNZ interview that “some [people] are getting obscenely rich and others are going to the food kitchens. That’s a dangerous position for a society... that’s the root cause of revolution.”

Last month, on August 28, Steve Maharey, who was a Labour government minister during the 2000s, pointed to the soaring inequality unleashed by Labour and National governments from the 1980s onwards. Writing for *Stuff*, he warned: “For those who think this is just the way it has to be, remember that the shift to equality came about through revolt, revolution and struggle. Not dealing with inequality makes it inevitable upheaval will happen again.”

The Ardern Labour government, no less than the Morrison government in Australia, used the pandemic to engineer an historic transfer of wealth to the rich, including quantitative easing, and \$19 billion in handouts under the so-called Wage Subsidy Scheme—which must now be paid for by the working class. Credit Suisse revealed last week in its Global Wealth Report that New Zealand leads the world in wealth creation, with an average 32 percent or \$US114,000 increase in wealth per adult in 2021. Of course, this is all captured by a very small layer of the population through the property market and the stock market.

Meanwhile the working class is plunging into poverty: the cost of living is soaring with inflation at 7.3 percent. According to one estimate, “households will need to find an extra \$110 per week to keep up in the next 12 months.” Homelessness is exploding. Since 2017, when Labour formed government promising to fix the housing crisis, the number of people on the public housing waiting list has increased more than fivefold, to 26,000, and the number of people known to be living in their cars has quadrupled to almost 500.

The pandemic is now completely out of control. A COVID-19 elimination policy was adopted in March 2020, as we explained at the time, out of fear of an upsurge in the working class. Of particular concern was the fact that mass support for a lockdown among healthcare workers and teachers had emerged outside of the unions, which publicly opposed the closure of schools and businesses.

The zero-Covid policy that was adopted formed the basis for the Ardern government’s re-election in October 2020 with more than 50 percent of the votes. Last October, however, the goal of elimination was abandoned, and with the arrival of Omicron, restrictions were removed, everything was reopened, with predictable disastrous results.

As in Australia, the trade unions played a central role in enforcing the criminal reopening policy.

On March 2, after police broke up a far-right, anti-vax protest that had lasted for three weeks on parliament’s lawn, Ardern declared that “in the middle of a pandemic, with 400 people hospitalised and 20,000 becoming sick in just one day, it’s almost impossible to comprehend that people would stand opposed to efforts to slow that down.”

But it did not take long for her government to adopt all the demands of the so-called Freedom Convoy. Deaths have sky-rocketed, with roughly 2,000 people killed by COVID this year and half the population infected. Mask and vaccine mandates have been scrapped and there is no longer any pretence of protecting people from the virus. Ardern has joined Joe Biden in declaring that the worst of the pandemic is over.

The reason was spelled out by the government’s senior public health official Dr Andrew Old, who stated during an interview on August 12: “There is a real, fundamental and probably irreconcilable difference between the need for certain companies to deliver profits to shareholders and the ideals and aspirations of... public health.”

All of this has contributed to a worsening political crisis. Ardern and Labour’s support has plummeted to around 35 percent, which is equal to

the National Party, which has itself gone through multiple leadership spills and has no real support.

We have observed that the mourning for Queen Elizabeth II reflects the ruling class’s yearning for stability, for tradition, for the illusion of national unity.

We are currently writing about the death of a prominent New Zealand Stalinist, Ken Douglas, who died a few days after the Queen. Government ministers have hailed him as a champion for the working class. Ken Douglas led the Council of Trade Unions during the 1980s and early 90s when the unions prevented any struggle against mass redundancies, privatisations and the impoverishment of the working class.

The old Stalinist parties have now collapsed and the unions, based on national reformism, have been deeply discredited and can no longer play the role they once did. Forty years ago, most workers were union members, now it is about 14 percent of the workforce.

Your resolution in support of the IWA-RFC states: “The class struggle has increasingly broken through the mechanisms of suppression maintained by the unions for the past 40 years and intensified during the pandemic. As is the case internationally, the most significant feature of these emerging movements is their development as an incipient rebellion of the working class against the trade unions, directly posing the need for new organisations of struggle and a new political perspective.”

The same tendency will be seen increasingly in New Zealand. The SEG and the WSWS have played a significant role over the past two years in mobilising support for the families of those killed in the Pike River disaster—in opposition to the Ardern government and the unions. The unions, which helped cause the underground deaths of 29 men, have worked with successive Labour and National governments to bury the evidence, seal the mine, and protect the company managers responsible.

This is a microcosm of the role that these organisations played internationally during the pandemic: their role is to isolate the working class, to protect the profit system, no matter how many workers have to die.

I agree with the emphasis that this congress has placed on the fight to build new organisations of the working class. The emerging upsurge of class struggles provides us with the opportunity to intervene, but as comrades have stressed, this must be accompanied by the recruitment and the education of workers as Marxists.

The coming anniversaries marking 100 years of the Trotskyist movement, and 25 years of the *World Socialist Web Site*, will provide critical opportunities to clarify the political perspective that workers must adopt, and to build the ICFI as the World Party of Socialist Revolution, including new sections in New Zealand and other countries.



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