

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern resigns

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In a shock announcement on Thursday, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told the media she would step down from the position by February 7 and leave parliament in April.

After more than five years leading the Labour Party-led government, Ardern offered little explanation for her sudden departure, other than saying she was burnt out. “I know what this job takes, and I know that I no longer have enough in the tank to do it justice. It is that simple,” she said, adding, “I am looking forward to spending time with my family again.”

Ardern’s resignation apparently took most Labour politicians by surprise and has thrown the government into turmoil ahead of a national election scheduled for October. Labour MPs will meet on Sunday to try and choose a new leader, but according to the *New Zealand Herald* there is “no clear consensus on who should succeed Ardern.” Deputy prime minister and finance minister Grant Robertson has ruled himself out as a contender.

Ardern claimed she was “not leaving because I believe we can’t win the election, but because I believe we can and will, and we need a fresh set of shoulders for that challenge.” This is not credible. In recent months Labour has polled around 33 percent—a dramatic decline since the 2020 election when it won more than half the votes.

The opposition National Party is only polling around 38 percent, reflecting widespread hostility towards both the major capitalist parties. This is an international phenomenon: everywhere, including in the United States, Europe and Australia, voters see little difference between any of the established parties. Traditional parliamentary and two-party systems are increasingly discredited and are breaking apart under the impact of the economic crisis, soaring social inequality and class polarisation, the out-of-control pandemic and the headlong rush towards another world war.

The NZ Labour Party, under Ardern’s leadership was barely able to form a government in 2017 in a coalition with the Greens and the far-right New Zealand First. In 2020, Labour won just over 50 percent of the votes, partly due to the shambolic state of the National Party, beset by factional warfare and conflicts over foreign policy.

Wealthy areas of the country switched their support to Labour largely because of the Ardern government’s multi-billion dollar handouts to big business and the rich during the first year of the pandemic—which are now being paid for by the working class through rampant inflation and austerity measures.

To the extent that Labour was supported by the working class in 2020, it was because the government had implemented a series of lockdowns and other public health measures which kept the country almost entirely free from COVID-19. The elimination strategy was implemented out of fear of a movement developing among healthcare

workers, in particular, pushing for a nationwide lockdown, outside of the pro-government trade unions.

Labour’s and Ardern’s support began falling sharply in early 2022, coinciding with a major deterioration in workers’ living standards and the government’s disastrous adoption of the homicidal policy of mass COVID-19 infection. In late 2021, the government acceded to the demands of big business to abandon its “zero COVID” policy. As a result, the death toll from COVID has surged from just 30 in October 2021 to more than 3,000. Hospitals are overwhelmed and tens of thousands of people are likely to be suffering from Long COVID.

Meanwhile, inflation is driving broad sections of the working class into poverty. In her speech yesterday Ardern said her government had “turned around child poverty statistics” and “improved the pay and conditions of workers, and shifted our settings towards a high wage, high skilled economy.” This is a lie. That same day, statistics were released showing food prices went up 11.3 percent in the past year, the biggest jump since 1990 and far outstripping wages, which increased only 3.7 percent in the year to September.

New Zealand is experiencing a severe housing crisis, with more than 102,000 homeless people in a population of 5 million—the highest rate of homelessness in the OECD. The waiting list for public housing has increased fivefold since Labour formed a coalition government in 2017 and made false promises to fix the crisis by building 100,000 “affordable” homes. Only 1,500 homes were built in five years under the Kiwibuild scheme.

Since 2018, the Ardern government has repeatedly confronted nationwide strikes by nurses, doctors and other healthcare workers, as well as teachers and firefighters, demanding decent pay and safe working conditions. These actions have been systematically shut down and sold out by the union bureaucracies, which have also worked closely with the government and big business to dismantle public health restrictions and reopen schools and workplaces.

Ardern is bailing out at precisely the point where the ruling elite is demanding a major escalation in the attacks on the working class to make it pay for the global economic crisis. Reserve Bank governor Adrian Orr has admitted that it is lifting interest rates in order to engineer a recession, to increase unemployment and drive down wages.

The implicit message contained in Ardern’s vague speech was that she does not feel up to the task of implementing this brutal agenda and confronting the resistance that will emerge in the working class. In a telling statement comparing the present period to a war, she told the media: “It’s one thing to lead your country in peace times, it’s another to lead them through [a] crisis; there’s a greater weight of responsibility.”

It also cannot be ruled out that Ardern's resignation was prompted by pressure from New Zealand's allies in Washington and Canberra, which are seeking a stronger commitment from Wellington to the far-advanced preparations for world war against Russia and China.

As a minor imperialist power, New Zealand is an integral part of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network and has actively participated in the criminal US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Ardern government has sent about 200 troops to the UK and central Europe to assist with training and supplying Ukraine's military for the US-NATO war against Russia.

Former Prime Minister John Key resigned in 2016 and his National Party government was relentlessly attacked by pro-US academics and journalists because of its promotion of stronger economic ties with China, New Zealand's most important trading partner. Following the inconclusive 2017 election, the US ambassador publicly indicated Washington's preference for a Labour-Greens-NZ First coalition government, which the Trump administration believed would take a stronger stance in support of the US against China.

There have been recriminations, particularly from the Australian media and foreign policy establishment, that New Zealand has refused to fall into line and continues to try and balance between the US and China. The *Australian's* foreign editor Greg Sheridan writes today that under Ardern "New Zealand was a tiny, frightened mouse when it came to Beijing." He complains that "her government did nothing to revive New Zealand's substantially non-existent defence forces."

In general, however, the international media greeted Ardern's resignation with an outpouring of praise, tinged with anxiety. The *Washington Post* called her "an inspiration to women around the world." The *New York Times* described her as "a global emblem of anti-Trump liberalism."

Former US secretary of state and war criminal Hilary Clinton hailed Ardern "for guiding her country with strength, compassion, and grace through multiple historic crises, doubtless saving countless lives." She did not mention New Zealand's disastrous adoption of the same "let it rip" COVID policy that has killed more than 1.2 million people in the US.

In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Australian Labor Party Prime Minister Anthony Albanese calls Ardern "a true leader" who "reminded us all that kindness and strength are not mutually exclusive."

He praised Ardern, in particular, for her response to the March 15, 2019 terrorist attack in Christchurch, in which fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant massacred 51 people at two mosques. "I will always carry in my mind that image of Jacinda in a headscarf, offering the embrace of a nation to a community stricken by grief and fear," Albanese said.

In fact, the response of both the Australian and New Zealand governments to the Christchurch atrocity was to whitewash the role of the police and intelligence agencies, which did not prevent the attack despite multiple warnings about Tarrant. Since then, Ardern has exploited the events of March 15 to justify the expansion of the intelligence agencies, and has led an international campaign to censor the internet in the name of combating "extremism."

Over the past five years, Ardern has been relentlessly glorified in the world's media, for being a woman, then for having a baby while serving as prime minister, and later for her response to the 2019 terror attack and the pandemic.

Commenting on this phenomenon following the election in October 2020, the WSWs noted that New Zealand was falsely portrayed "as an exception, a beacon of hope and a haven from the chaos sweeping

the planet. The aim is to persuade working people that the colossal problems they face can be resolved within the present system if only 'kind' and 'compassionate' leaders like Ardern are elected."

As we predicted, these illusions could not be sustained in the face of the ruthless pro-business restructuring carried out by the Ardern government. The entire charade has been fundamentally undermined by the worsening social crisis, the out-of-control pandemic and the growing militarisation of New Zealand society under her government.

In New Zealand, the Labour Party's middle class liberal and pseudo-left supporters have been thrown into despair. The "left-wing" *Daily Blog* editor Martyn Bradbury called Ardern "one of the best leaders Labour has had" and declared: "This is a terrible blow to the Political Left. We will be in shock for some time."

Like many media pundits, he blamed Ardern's decision to quit on "toxic attacks on Jacinda personally that the Right have whipped up"—without mentioning that Labour emboldened the extreme right, firstly through its alliance with the racist and anti-immigrant NZ First, and then its adoption of all the far-right demands for letting COVID rip.

Dougal McNeill, a leading member of the International Socialist Organisation, which supported Labour in the last several elections, similarly wrote on Twitter: "The (misogynist, vile) hatred for Ardern was against all that was her best, a world away from the radical left's criticisms of her limits. That's why today, thinking about going hard early on COVID & showing solidarity after the Christchurch massacre, I feel, yes, sadness."

These statements echo former Labour Party Prime Minister Helen Clark, who told the media "Jacinda has faced a level of hatred and vitriol which in my experience is unprecedented in our country." The right-wing Mōri Party, which is positioning itself as an ally of Labour, similarly issued a statement declaring that Ardern was "driven from office [by] constant personalisation and vilification."

The aim of all such commentary is to divert attention from the fact that Ardern led the most right-wing, pro-business government in recent memory, which is carrying out historic attacks on the working class. Whatever the immediate outcome of the leadership crisis in the Labour Party, this agenda will only intensify.

As the entire political establishment lurches further to the right, the urgent task facing socialist-minded workers and young people is to prepare for the class battles ahead by breaking decisively from Labour and all its allies, including the Green Party, the union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left groups. We urge readers to contact the Socialist Equality Group and join our fight for the international unity of the working class and the socialist reorganisation of society.



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