

New Zealand: Demands for Maori “co-governance” intensify

John Braddock
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Waitangi Day, New Zealand’s national holiday on February 6, this year provoked escalating demands for constitutional change to entrench Māori “co-governance” across the political system.

The day celebrates the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi between tribal chiefs and representatives of the British Empire in 1840.

The Treaty made false promises that the British would respect Māori sovereignty over their land. By the end of the bitter 1845–1872 New Zealand Wars, most land had been confiscated by the colonial power. For the next century, the treaty remained disregarded apart from ceremonial occasions and was widely dismissed by Māori activists as a “fraud.”

Beginning in the mid-1980s, however, the political establishment elevated the Treaty to the status of the country’s founding document, supposedly as the basis for addressing the historical crimes of colonisation. Interpretations of the document’s meaning have expanded from the concept of a “partnership” between races to indigenous “sovereignty”—that is, full control by Māori tribes, known as iwi, over “their own” affairs.

A Treaty claims process has enabled tribes to obtain millions in compensation from the state, which has been used to establish highly profitable business operations. None of this has benefited the vast majority of Māori working people, who make up around 16 percent of the population and remain deeply impoverished.

With an election due in October, key sections of the ruling elite are backing demands by the tribal leadership that “honouring” the Treaty means a further expansion of their assets, political influence and control over infrastructure and social services. The Labour-Green Party government, supported by sections of the upper-middle classes and big business, is presenting this agenda as “progressive.”

Immediately on the agenda is Labour’s “Three Waters” legislation, which will give Māori tribes “co-governance” of water pipes, treatment facilities and other infrastructure. Under the proposed restructuring, four new water entities will be half controlled by elected council representatives and

half by unelected tribal business representatives.

The legislation, currently before parliament, is deeply unpopular. It is correctly seen as giving private interests a significant say in decisions relating to a vital resource. All opposition to the deal, however, is denounced by tribal leaders and Labour’s supporters as “racism” driven by the right-wing opposition parties.

At a meeting at Waitangi with the powerful Iwi Chairs Forum, Prime Minister Hipkins was urged not to back away from the deal. Waikato-Tainui tribal representative Tukoroirangi Morgan, who leads the Māori body that will co-govern water in Auckland and Northland, told the media that removing co-governance from Three Waters would be to “succumb to the attack dogs of the National Party and [the far-right] ACT as they fan the flames of racism and anti-Māori sentiments.”

Hipkins said he understood the iwi leaders’ “concern that they don’t want to see ethnicity, race, being used as a way of dividing New Zealanders.” He declared that co-governance had been “misunderstood” and National and ACT had “used uncertainty to try and stoke fear.”

Hipkins later suggested that co-governance could be rebranded, proposing the vague title “mahi tahi,” which means “working together.” Willie Jackson, minister for Māori development, bitterly told *Newsroom* that the ACT and National leaders, David Seymour and Christopher Luxon, had convinced the public “that it is all part of a Māori take-over. We have to reframe it, and we’re looking at possibilities.”

Labour’s claim that it does not want to stoke divisions is a lie. The entire political establishment and state bureaucracy is working for precisely this aim.

Shortly before Waitangi Day, the state’s Human Rights Commission published two lengthy reports which portray New Zealand as a society based on “systemic racism” and “white privilege.” They call for “constitutional change” based on the Treaty to create parallel systems of government for Māori and non-Māori. One of these reports—*Maranga Mai!* [Rise Up]—argues that co-governance is the only way to

eliminate racism because “the prevailing P?keh? [white] tendency is to avoid acknowledging, recognising, or changing institutional racism.”

In the lead-up to the election, the government and media are desperately seeking to divert attention from the worsening social crisis facing working people of every ethnicity, and to channel rising anger into reactionary conflicts over race.

Whatever their differences, Labour and the opposition parties agree on the fundamental agenda of big business: that the working class as a whole, including M?ori workers, must pay for the economic crisis with major attacks on living standards. The cost of living is soaring and the Reserve Bank is lifting interest rates to trigger a recession and a sharp increase in unemployment, in order to drive down wages.

All the establishment parties support the policy of mass COVID-19 infection. The abandonment of the zero-COVID policy by the Labour government in late 2021, a decision dictated by big business, has resulted in roughly 3,000 deaths.

In addition, there can be no debate about New Zealand’s support for the US-NATO war against Russia, or the build-up to war against China. Labour, the Greens, ACT and National all agree on major increases in military spending and integrating NZ into the US war machine, which is careening towards a third world war.

Labour’s use of identity politics to justify further enriching the M?ori elite plays directly into the hands of ACT, NZ First and other forces on the extreme right, which are stoking racism by falsely claiming that co-governance gives the M?ori population as a whole “privileged” status at the expense of the rest of the population.

ACT leader David Seymour, in a major speech this week, presented his party as being based on reason, “equality” and the Enlightenment, and claimed that “principles of universal human rights” were being replaced by “skin colour or background.” He sought to associate his party with Galileo, Einstein and even Martin Luther King Jr.

This rhetoric serves to obscure ACT’s extreme pro-market agenda. ACT speaks for sections of big business that view the M?ori tribal elite as rivals. The party advocates pro-business deregulation, the privatisation of healthcare, education and other services, and further tax cuts for the rich, as well as a major increase in defence spending to prepare for war against China.

The positions of ACT and National, no less than the identity politics advanced by the Labour government, are intended to cover-up the reality that the fundamental division in society is not race, but class. It is not “white people” who are responsible for the dispossession of M?ori and their ongoing oppression, but capitalism.

Since the 1980s, the “Treaty settlements” process has been bound up with the need to prevent a unified fight by M?ori and other workers against privatisation, mass redundancies and pro-corporate restructuring. While M?ori workers and youth were encouraged to reject class solidarity and identify primarily with their tribal origins, Treaty payments were used by successive Labour and National governments to establish lucrative business operations through the exploitation of workers of all races.

Minister Jackson boasted last November that M?ori business assets have grown from \$16 billion to \$70 billion in the past 20 years. A privileged layer has been created, consisting of entrepreneurs, academics, lawyers, politicians and state sector leaders, dedicated to the defence of the profit system.

Creating a layer of M?ori capitalists has done nothing to improve conditions for the vast majority. Wealth inequality within the indigenous population is twice as high as in the NZ population as a whole. M?ori households receive 35 percent of their income from social security, compared with 9 percent for non-M?ori households. Social security claims nearly trebled between 2013 and 2018, and by 2018 M?ori households were collectively \$9 billion in debt. Nearly 50 percent of the M?ori workforce are in low-skilled, low-security, and low-paid occupations.

The Socialist Equality Group opposes “co-governance” and all forms of racial identity politics from the socialist left. The wealth and resources of society must be taken out of the hands of private companies, regardless of whether these are run by M?ori or non-M?ori capitalists, and placed under the democratic control and ownership of the entire working class.

The agenda of all factions of the ruling class for greater privatisation and the running down of public services, can only be defeated by a unified movement of the working class—M?ori, white, Asian, Pacific islanders, and all other ethnic and national groups—based on their common class interests. This movement must link up with the international working class in a struggle to abolish capitalism and reorganise the world economy on the basis of socialism.



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