New Zealand Labour government boosts military spending

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In a pre-budget announcement on May 8, New Zealand Prime Minister Chris Hipkins revealed the Labour Party-led government will allocate another $NZ748 million over four years in a new tranche of military spending, a 15.5 percent increase.

Hipkins made the announcement on his return from London for the coronation of King Charles. En route, he had had a "warm and insightful" phone call with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, followed just days later by a declaration that Labour would boost New Zealand's support for the US-NATO war against Russia by $5.3 million, bringing the total so far to $78 million.

The money handed out to the military belies Hipkins' statements, when he took over after the resignation of Jacinda Ardern in January, that he would concentrate on "bread and butter" issues to address rapidly deteriorating living standards. Labour's budget, due later this week, will seek to reduce total spending from 35 percent of gross domestic product to around 30 percent.

The new Defence Force (NZDF) spend will include $243 million for assets and infrastructure, $419 million for wages and a further $85 million for housing on bases. Defence Minister Andrew Little boasted that the package "delivers the biggest pay increase in over a decade for defence personnel and builds on the government's record investments in upgrading NZ's military capability."

An immediate 10 percent average boost to pay rates has been brought forward as the military, like others internationally, faces a recruitment crisis. The NZDF has lost a net 10 percent (about 900) of its uniformed staff in two years, leading to the idling of three navy ships and the early retirement of the Orion aircraft fleet.

While the government and media blamed a "tight post-pandemic labour market," the recruitment and retention crisis also reflects broad anti-war sentiment, particularly among youth, who do not want to be sacrificed in unpopular imperialist wars.

The wage increase contrasts sharply with the situation facing nurses, teachers and other professions experiencing severe shortages and who are involved in a bitter fight against the Labour government's pay freeze. Last week 20,000 secondary teachers held nationwide strikes over the latest below-inflation pay offer.

The NZDF increase comes on top of a massive growth in its budgets since Labour took office in 2017, including $4.7 billion on new hardware. Defence spending as a proportion of GDP has risen from 1 percent to nearly 2 percent. A key aspect of the upgrades, including the $3 billion purchase of Poseidon anti-submarine surveillance aircraft, has been to improve "interoperability" with US and allied forces.

In a pitch towards the October 14 election, Labour released a militarist advertisement proclaiming: "We're investing in our defence force, so they can be there when NZ'ers need them." Minister Little claimed that Labour's annual average "investment" in military equipment since 2017 was $691 million, compared with the previous National Party government's $473 million.

The announcement highlighted alarm in ruling circles about New Zealand's ability to meet rapidly developing military demands amid escalating global tensions and conflict. New Zealand is providing training for Ukrainian forces in the US-NATO war against Russia and preparing to join the US and Australia in what would be an even more devastating war against China.

There is mounting pressure from Washington and Canberra for New Zealand to increase its commitment on both fronts of what is developing into a Third World War.

New Zealand is a minor imperialist power allied with the US and a member of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence sharing network. The Labour government is considering whether to participate in the AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) pact, which includes a deal to supply

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Australia with nuclear-powered attack submarines and other measures to integrate Australia into the US war plans.

Sections of New Zealand's ruling elite and corporate media remain nervous about the government's absorption into the US-led geostrategic offensive, particularly in the Pacific, warning that joining AUKUS may not be in the country's "best interests." Concerns remain that the country cannot afford to get offside with China, its major trading partner.

Assertions of New Zealand's "independent foreign policy" are being wheeled out to defend the increasingly fraught balancing act. In a recent speech Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta highlighted Labour's so-called "indigenous" approach in the Pacific, based on purported M?ori "perspectives." Mahuta said New Zealand was "not afraid to stick up for what it values," including nuclear non-proliferation and a nuclear-free Pacific.

In fact, New Zealand's "independence" has always been a myth. To maintain its own neo-colonial position in the Pacific, the ruling class has depended on the support of the major imperialist powers—first Britain, then after World War II, the US. In a recent interview with TVNZ, Minister Little stated: "An independent foreign policy isn't [about] being in isolation. [For] 40 years we have strengthened our partnerships and relationships with all sorts of countries, including the US and obviously with Australia," as well as France, the UK and other European powers.

With increasing popular opposition to war, the M?ori Party (Te P?ti M?ori, TPM), which represents sections of the indigenous business elite and hopes to join the Labour-led government after the election, is posturing as a pacifist alternative to the major parties.

TPM president John Tamihere, a former Labour cabinet minister, declared that the party would demand "military neutrality" as part of any coalition deal, including withdrawal from the Five Eyes and no more "kowtowing" to Australia's military decisions. This would mean "being a friend to everyone and an enemy to no-one" and acting internationally as a "peacekeeper."

Hipkins rubbished the demands, warning that minor parties should be more "realistic" with their policy "bottom lines" or find themselves "simply not able to be part of any governing arrangement at all." He asserted that leaving the Five Eyes "would have potential consequences for Kiwis on a daily basis."

TPM has previously served in coalition governments alongside the right-wing National Party, which deployed troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. Whatever it says before the election, the party will support such imperialist policies again—like the Greens, which have a "pacifist" policy on paper but are part of the Labour-led government and back its alignment with the US and NATO.

The criticisms of AUKUS and other military alliances by TPM and various pseudo-left and academic commentators are aimed at diverting anti-war sentiment among workers and youth behind the defence of New Zealand's "national interests"—that is, the interests of the capitalist class.

Far from putting forward a program to oppose war—including the one raging in Ukraine and threatening a nuclear catastrophe—they simply propose that New Zealand stand aside by proclaiming its "independence."

This nationalist perspective is epitomised by *Daily Blog* editor Martyn Bradbury, a supporter of TPM and the Greens, who calls for a policy of national isolationism behind "Fortress New Zealand." Bradbury ridiculed the defence spending as a "joke," stating that it "doesn't in any way shape or form prepare NZ for the military challenges in front of us."

Bradbury demanded an increase in the defence budget to 3 percent of GDP in order to "distance ourselves from China and America," and to defend "the realm of NZ and all our economic exclusive zone."

Under the guise of national defence, this is a policy to prepare for war. In fact, the *Daily Blog* regularly echoes anti-Russia and anti-China propaganda churned out by the US. Bradbury has demanded that the state investigate the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) in New Zealand for "treason" because of our opposition to this propaganda.

A genuine anti-war movement can only be built in opposition to the nationalist politics advanced by every party. It must be based on socialist and internationalist principles aimed at uniting the working class in every country against the imperialist war plans and their source: the capitalist system. This is the program outlined by the International Committee of the Fourth International at its recent Online May Day Rally and fought for in New Zealand by the SEG.

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