

WSWS speaks with former Radio New Zealand journalist Mick Hall about being smeared as a “Russian agent”

Tom Peters, John Braddock
2 November 2023

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with journalist Mick Hall, who was the victim of a hysterical anti-Russia campaign that erupted in June. Hall lost his job at Radio New Zealand (RNZ), the state-owned broadcaster, after being publicly denounced by his employer for making “inappropriate edits” to online articles from Reuters and the BBC, and spreading “pro-Kremlin garbage.”

As the WSWS wrote at the time, Hall, who worked as a sub-editor for RNZ’s website, was victimised for making entirely legitimate and necessary factual corrections to articles about the war in Ukraine and other topics. He became the target for a McCarthyite witch hunt, even being labelled a “Russian agent,” because he highlighted the role of neo-Nazis in Ukraine’s armed forces, and the fact that the 2014 US-backed coup in Ukraine toppled a pro-Russian government. This move directly paved the way for Russia’s reactionary invasion.

The New Zealand Labour Party-Greens government supports the US-NATO proxy war against Russia, with the support of the entire parliament. New Zealand troops are currently in Britain training Ukrainian conscripts to fight against Russia, in a war that has killed hundreds of thousands on both sides. Washington and its imperialist allies aim to use Ukraine to inflict a crushing military defeat against Russia, as part of what is an escalating global war aimed at seizing control of markets and resources from Russia and China.

Hall began our discussion by thanking the WSWS for its articles defending him, saying “those early stories were really appreciated.”

He explained that after the controversy erupted on June 9, “I felt really alone, I actually stopped looking through the media at that point because it was too overwhelming. I started to freak out about it. One of the stories that I did see was the initial one that [WSWS writer John Braddock] did and it made me feel less alone, and people stepped in after that.”

The media storm initially focused on Hall’s editorial changes to a Reuters article republished by RNZ. Luppe B. Luppen, a New York-based lawyer with connections to the Democratic Party, tweeted the RNZ link, labelling it “Russian propaganda.”

Reuters’ original article had stated that “The conflict in eastern Ukraine began in 2014 after a pro-Russian president was toppled in Ukraine’s Maidan Revolution and Russia annexed Crimea, with Russian-backed separatist forces fighting Ukraine’s armed forces.”

For the RNZ version, Hall removed Reuters’ glorification of the coup as a “revolution” and changed the passage to the following:

“The conflict in Ukraine began in 2014 after a pro-Russian elected government was toppled during Ukraine’s violent Maidan colour revolution. Russia annexed Crimea after a referendum, as the new pro-

Western government suppressed ethnic Russians in eastern and southern Ukraine, sending in its armed forces to the Donbas.”

Following Luppen’s tweet, Hall received a call from his immediate manager, who told him the situation “was very, very serious because I had changed the intended meaning of the story.” Hall replied that he stood by the changes, believing that it was permitted to alter stories from Reuters and other wire services and to add context.

Hall expected that he would face repercussions from his employer for procedural errors. He was “shocked” when he saw RNZ’s first report on the matter, which said it had “launched an investigation into how ‘Russian propaganda’ had ended up in a Reuters story published on their website. I was pretty astounded at how it had been framed. It was quite sensationalist and invited political intrigue, almost like clickbait. I still can’t figure out to this day whether that’s what management actually believed or if it was just a smear.”

RNZ conducted an “audit” of Hall’s work, identifying 49 articles where he had made so-called “inappropriate,” mostly very minor, editorial changes. In addition to articles on the war in Ukraine, the list included articles on Israel and Palestine, on the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, on Latin America, and on the US provocations against China over Taiwan. RNZ expunged Hall’s changes in all the articles.

In a December 2022 article on the Netanyahu government’s expansion of settlements on the West Bank, for instance, RNZ removed a description of the settlements as being “according to international law, illegal.” Hall’s correct formulation was replaced with one less damning of Israel, reading: “Most world powers deem settlements built on land captured in war illegal.”

Hall was initially placed on leave and within two weeks he resigned. The far-right ACT Party co-leader David Seymour set the tone by denouncing RNZ as “Red Radio” and the entire corporate media joined the pile-on accusing Hall of “Russian propaganda,” backed by the Labour Party government which endorsed RNZ’s investigation.

During this time, Hall said, “I was overwhelmed, I couldn’t put it into perspective. I knew that the accusations about being a Russian agent, and the speculation around it, were absurd.” He worried about other possible repercussions. “I’m a resident here and not a citizen. I have three New Zealand kids, and I catastrophised and thought there may be a possibility—because all this is absurd—that I’ll get sent home. That really concerned me a lot. I think at that stage my mental health started to suffer a little bit. It had a knock-on effect on my health. So it was a lot to deal with.”

Hall has been a journalist for more than 20 years, in both the UK

and, since 2009, in New Zealand. He has worked for the *Irish Post* in London, the *Belfast Telegraph*, Pagemasters, a former subsidiary of the Australian Associated Press, as well as News Corp in Australia. He has done freelance work for the *New Zealand Herald* and he joined RNZ in 2018.

Based on his many years of experience, Hall told the WSWS, “I thought it was part of standard journalistic duty to remove bias from any wires copy, and that’s what I did. I had got into a routine of putting context in and it didn’t start a year ago, it started many years ago.

“The changes that I made initially were so minor that I didn’t think anything of them. If I saw a story that leaned too heavily towards a US State Department position or a UK line, I would add context to balance it out or I would have reframed a paragraph. I thought that that was standard, that was always the way that I had approached wires copy.

“When the US started to try and contain China with provocations against China using Taiwan, and when the war started in Ukraine, the instances of US bias in Reuters copy or BBC copy increased. So the journalistic duty to address it increased for me, and I never really saw it as a subversive act or something that would be overly controversial.

“I’ve spoken to many people since I left Radio New Zealand, the likes of Joe Lauria at *Consortium News*. He worked in various international newspapers for years and he said [wire agencies’ reports] were always changed. It was pliable raw copy and you could do what you wanted with it.”

Throughout his ordeal, Hall did not receive any messages of support from any of his colleagues at RNZ, despite having worked there for five years. “They knew me, they knew what sort of person I was. I wasn’t close to that many people, you know, but I would have expected a phone call or a message.” He believes that this reflected “an atmosphere of fear” created by the company.

Hall also criticised the response of the union, E t?. “They should have been there at my back straight away. The union’s slow response to what was a matter of great urgency didn’t help matters at all.” E t? did not issue any public statement defending Hall.

He received support from independent investigative journalist Nicky Hager, and political cartoonist Malcolm Evans, who was sacked from the *New Zealand Herald* in 2003 following complaints from pro-Zionist lobbyists about his cartoons critical of Israel’s repression of the Palestinians.

With the assistance of lawyer Deborah Manning, Hall defended himself at a review panel hearing as part of RNZ’s inquiry. US academic Jeffrey Sachs and political scientist John Mearsheimer submitted letters defending Hall’s work.

Hall told the WSWS that the review panel gave him “some closure” but “didn’t go to the heart of the matter,” and that RNZ’s audit was “a politicised show trial and had little to do with editorial standards.” The process “left me without a job, left my health in tatters and my career in tatters.”

During an “intense cross-examination” in the hearing, Hall was accused by a member of the panel of betraying his colleagues’ trust. “It was the only point in the process where I was angry,” he said, because it indicated that staff at RNZ had been “conditioned to believe that I was a Russian agent... It just dawned on me how much I had been smeared and how my name had been dragged through the mud.”

In its report, released in August, the review panel criticised RNZ chief executive Paul Thompson’s inflammatory accusations that Hall

had inserted “pro-Kremlin garbage.” The report stated that the “vast majority of stories edited by the journalist were edited appropriately and professionally” but that inappropriate edits “involved adding information or using language which challenged the foreign policy settings of the United States or allies.”

Among other points, the panel took issue with the following sentence inserted by Hall into a May 6, 2022 article: “The Azov Battalion was widely regarded before the Russian invasion by Western media as a neo-Nazi military unit.”

Hall said: “It was a piece of context that I put in, but it was an inconvenient fact that didn’t fit the narrative. I don’t think that it was an issue of standards, I think that it was a political issue for them and a sensitive issue for them. I shouldn’t have been punished for it in the way that I was.

“They thought that I needed to put in some type of counter-context: that the Azov Battalion, because it now formed part of the Ukrainian interior ministry, was somehow reined in, and there’s no evidence of that. Also they said that the context needed to be attributed to a Russian position, and I don’t see why, because I was stating a fact. The mainstream media, the western media, had characterised the Battalion as a neo-Nazi unit.”

The corporate media began whitewashing the Azov Battalion and other fascist organisations in Ukraine following Russia’s invasion in February 2022, which had been directly provoked and instigated by the United States and NATO. Azov now plays a major role in the Ukrainian armed forces, while the Zelensky regime has promoted the Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera and his Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists, which took part in the Holocaust, as national heroes.

The rehabilitation of fascism is reflected across the New Zealand media and academia. Last December the WSWS reported on a photographic and historical exhibition on Ukraine, hosted at Victoria University of Wellington and the Auckland War Memorial, which glorified the Azov Battalion and Bandera, while painting the Soviet Union as the aggressor in World War II and making no mention of the Nazi Holocaust. There was no criticism of the pro-fascist exhibition outside the WSWS.

Commenting on the media coverage of Israel’s genocidal bombing of Gaza, which broadly supports the New Zealand government’s position that Israel is “defending itself,” Hall said: “I think it makes my work at Radio New Zealand look vindicated in a way. I don’t take any pleasure from that. But I think the media bias is exposed, and if you can’t see it, there’s really something wrong: it reflects a limited capacity to view the world the way it is.”

With social media and independent reporting, he said, “people can see exactly what’s happening on the ground straight away. It’s created an opportunity where you can contrast what’s happening on the ground with what’s being stated in newspapers, and that contrast is so stark.”

Hall continues to work as an independent journalist. His articles, including several that expose the corporate media’s lying propaganda in support of Israel’s war, can be found at mickhall.substack.com.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact