

New Zealand media demands more military spending

Tom Peters
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The *New Zealand Herald*, the country's major newspaper, published two major articles on Wednesday by reporter David Fisher, under the headlines "NZ Defence Force in crisis—our ships can't sail, planes can't fly and soldiers have left in droves" and "NZDF needs a lot of cash and [new Defence Minister] Judith Collins could be the way to get it."

These articles are part of an escalating media campaign to prepare public opinion to accept a major increase in military spending, as New Zealand is integrated more closely into US-led war preparations against China, the ongoing US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and potentially new wars in the Middle East.

By actively supporting Israel's genocide against the people of Gaza, US imperialism is showing that it is determined to maintain its dominant global position using the most ruthless and barbaric methods.

Minor imperialist powers such as New Zealand are scrambling to ensure that they can take part in, and profit from, the new redivision of the world. New Zealand is a US ally and sent troops to join the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The previous Labour Party-led government deployed forces to the UK to assist in training Ukrainian soldiers for the proxy war against Russia.

As a member of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence sharing network (which also includes Australia, Canada and the UK), New Zealand also plays a significant role in spying throughout the Indo-Pacific region, including against China.

The *New Zealand Herald*, however, is giving voice to growing concern in sections of the ruling class that the armed forces are not prepared to play a more substantial role in a major war. According to official documents cited by the newspaper, the NZDF faces a

"retention crisis" having lost almost a third (31.25 percent) of its full time personnel in the 21 months to April 2023.

A sharp drop in technicians and maintenance staff means aircraft and navy vessels frequently cannot be operated safely, with four out of nine naval craft currently unable to leave port. "It is the same across the three branches of service," Fisher says. "In the Army, the significant loss of senior NCOs—lance corporals, corporals and sergeants—has removed a depth of experience critical in maintaining and developing a strong military."

Fisher also laments the lack of investment in new technology and weapons, such as "drone-enabled explosives," which "will be a necessity on the modern battlefield." He says "there is a chasm of need which will need a lot of money to fill."

Fisher notes with concern that the recently formed coalition government—led by the conservative National Party with the libertarian ACT and the right-wing nationalist New Zealand First playing major roles—does not mention defence spending in its list of priorities for its first 100 days.

Pointing out that New Zealand's annual military spending of \$5.3 billion equates to 1.3 percent of gross domestic product—placing the country 94th in the world—Fisher says ACT has previously called for it to be increased to 2 percent.

The *New Zealand Herald* writer does not spell out exactly why such a vast expansion is needed, but says ominously that "it is expected our military is going to be called on more often than in the past and into more dangerous situations." Without mentioning the US alliance, Fisher says: "Our ability to project our military force in a particularly New Zealand way buys seats at many tables. It brings returns in the form of

better economic and foreign relations.”

Fisher also warns that an inability to deploy forces into the Pacific region to assist in “climate-related disasters” would create a “void” that might be exploited by China. Climate change and natural disasters are frequently used, including by the Green Party, to justify increased military spending.

In reality, as Andrew Little, defence minister in the previous Labour Party-led government, openly declared last August, the ruling class wants the military to be ready because New Zealand “may be called on to play a role should conflict break out” between the US and China.

The new government is already involved in the war planning. In his first overseas trip since taking office, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon visited Australia in December to discuss stronger military cooperation in the Pacific region. He raised the potential for New Zealand to participate in the anti-China AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) pact, which will supply Australia with nuclear-powered attack submarines and strengthen interoperability with US and allied forces.

Strategic analysts and media pundits in the US and elsewhere are discussing war with China as an inevitability and warning of the need, as one *Foreign Affairs* article puts it, “to sustain popular support for the war effort, along with a willingness to sacrifice.” If the New Zealand media is less forthright, that is bound up with the country’s economic dependence on exports to China, NZ’s largest export market, as well as concerns about widespread anti-war sentiment in the working class.

Attrition in the armed forces reflects not only low wages—the NZDF has offered large retention bonuses in a desperate attempt to stop staff from leaving—but broad hostility to militarism.

Since the October 14 election, tens of thousands of people in New Zealand have joined global protests demanding an end to the genocide in Gaza. Protesters have denounced Labour and National governments for supporting the Netanyahu regime, as well as New Zealand’s alliance with the United States.

Plans to boost military spending will fuel further opposition, particularly as the government is imposing austerity and demanding thousands of job cuts in public services. New frigates, air force planes and more powerful weapons, along with a vast increase in

personnel, will have to be paid for with even deeper cuts to healthcare, education and other vital services.

To carry out a sustained struggle against this agenda, the anti-war movement must be fused with the emerging movement of the working class against the attacks on wages, living standards and public services.

War cannot be stopped by appealing to imperialist governments and parties, such as Labour and its allies in New Zealand, any more than the Democrats in the US. The fight against war requires a break with all capitalist organisations, including a rebellion against the trade unions in every country, which are enabling the production and shipment of weapons for the genocide in Gaza.

Above all, there can be no serious talk of stopping a Third World War outside of the fight to abolish the source of war—the capitalist system and the brutal struggle by rival nations over resources and territory—and to reorganise the world along socialist lines.



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