

New Zealand government uses Waitangi Day to stoke racial divisions

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New Zealand's right-wing National Party-led coalition government used Waitangi Day on February 6, the country's national day, to stoke racial divisions and divert attention from its escalating assault on the public services and the integration of the country into US war plans.

The day commemorates the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi by the British Empire and hundreds of indigenous Māori tribal leaders in 1840. The document paved the way for the colonisation of New Zealand by transferring sovereignty to the British Crown; in the Māori language translation, however, the word "sovereignty" was replaced with *kawanatanga*, meaning governance, which concealed what the tribes were actually giving up.

The Treaty made false promises to the tribes that their land and resources would not be taken from them, unless fairly purchased by the Crown. It was a means for the British to buy time to prepare to take the land through a combination of military force and pseudo-legal trickery and to establish capitalist economic relations in New Zealand.

Since the 1970s, successive governments have elevated the Treaty to the status of a founding national document, claiming that it marked the start of an enduring "partnership" between the European settlers and the Māori tribes. Prime Minister Christopher Luxon told Radio NZ on February 7: "the Treaty is sacrosanct, it's our founding document, it's in the constitution of the National Party... we're deeply, deeply committed to it and it's not changing."

From the 1990s onwards, governments have paid hundreds of millions of dollars to the tribes as compensation for breaches of the Treaty identified by the Waitangi Tribunal. Luxon declared at Waitangi that he wanted to complete more Treaty settlements and he envisioned a future in which "some of New Zealand's most successful enterprises nationally and internationally are iwi [tribal] businesses who are using their profits to invest in their people, their rohe [territories], and more business growth."

The Treaty settlements, however, have done nothing for the vast majority of Māori, who are among the poorest layers of the working class. They have created a wealthy layer of tribal business leaders, politicians, state bureaucrats, lawyers and academics, who vigorously defend capitalism and strive to prevent Māori and non-Māori workers from uniting against this system.

Today, under conditions of an escalating social crisis and obscene levels of inequality, the ruling elite is deeply concerned that this arrangement is not enough to hold back the class struggle.

Repeated nationwide strikes by tens of thousands of healthcare workers, teachers and university staff during the 2017-2023 Labour government, which the trade union bureaucracy at times struggled to suppress, has raised the spectre of a unified movement of workers against austerity.

Likewise, the global mass protests against Israel's genocide in Gaza have brought together people of every nationality and ethnicity in opposition to the war and New Zealand's role as an imperialist ally of the United States. Māori, Pacific Islanders and Middle Eastern migrant workers have all played a prominent role in the weekly protests alongside white workers and students.

The political establishment is desperately trying to contain this movement and to divert social tensions and anger in the most reactionary direction. A leading role is being played by the National Party's deeply unpopular far-right coalition partners, the libertarian ACT Party and the nationalist, anti-immigrant NZ First Party. These parties, which received just 8.6 and 6 percent respectively in the October 2023 election, are stoking racism with entirely false claims that Māori as a whole have been given special privileges by successive governments and the Waitangi Tribunal.

The ACT Party has attracted significant media attention for its proposal to reinterpret the Treaty of Waitangi by legislating a new set of "Treaty principles" and putting them to a referendum. ACT's proposed principles, which do not mention Māori, emphasise the Treaty's defence of capitalist property. They declare that "all New Zealanders are equal under the law" and that the government has the right to govern the country and to "protect all New Zealanders' authority over their land and other property."

ACT leader David Seymour has attempted to reassure the tribal capitalists that he has no quarrel with them. He has repeatedly stated that he supports the Treaty settlements as a means of defending the tribes' private property rights.

The party's campaign is calculated to inflame tensions among ordinary people by insinuating that all Māori have been given special status and non-Māori are second-class citizens. This is the meaning of ACT's slogans such as: "Every child deserves to grow up with the same inherent respect and dignity."

In a recent Newshub interview, Seymour said the Waitangi Tribunal's claim "that there's a partnership between the Crown and Māori... means that the status of everyone else in New Zealand is a bit unclear." He added: "[I]f Māori have the right to *tino rangatiratanga*, or self-determination, what does everyone else in New Zealand have?"

Such statements are utterly fraudulent. The reality is that *nobody* in the working class has any genuine “self-determination” or control over their lives. Working people, Māori and non-Māori alike, are stripped of their “respect and dignity” and face increasingly unbearable living conditions.

About 600,000 people, 11 percent of the population, rely on food parcels every month. More than 102,000 people, 2 percent of the population, are experiencing severe housing deprivation or homelessness. A recent survey of hundreds of schools by the charity KidsCan found that 65 percent said poverty is worsening in their community and there are growing numbers of children coming to school hungry or exhausted from having to work to support their families.

Māori, who make up about 15 percent of the population, are over-represented in all the statistics related to poverty, including income, educational achievement, poverty-related illnesses and life expectancy. Along with Pacific Islanders, Māori workers are among the most oppressed and impoverished in society.

New Zealand is an extremely divided society. The fundamental division, however, is not between Māori and “everyone else” but between the business elite—including the Māori tribal business owners—and working people of every background and ethnicity.

The entire political establishment is seeking to obscure this reality. That is why Luxon, despite claiming to oppose any referendum on Treaty principles, agreed to support ACT’s legislation through its first reading in parliament so it can be publicly debated. For months on end, politicians and the media will seek to whip up racial “tensions” and “divisions,” while the gulf between rich and poor widens.

New Zealand First also claims to oppose ACT’s proposal, but is actively campaigning on anti-Māori and anti-immigrant demagoguery. The party’s demands, agreed to by National and ACT, include de-emphasising Māori names for government agencies and restricting the use of Māori language by public servants.

The racist scapegoating of Māori and migrants takes place as major new attacks are being prepared against the working class. The government has instructed all public agencies to cut spending by 6.5 to 7.5 percent—except for the military, police and prisons, all of which will see major funding boosts.

Thousands of jobs will be eliminated, while the repressive arms of the state are strengthened. The government is promising to increase the prison population through tougher sentencing, including for youth offenders, to deal with the inevitable consequences of worsening poverty and inequality.

As unemployment increases, young people, including many Māori, will be pressured to join the military as New Zealand is integrated into US-led wars in the Middle East, against Russia, and the build-up to war with China.

Thousands of people protested across the country on Waitangi Day against the coalition government—an expression of widespread opposition to its promotion of racism and its broader agenda of austerity and war.

The rallies, however, were dominated politically by Te Pahi Māori (TPM)—a party representing tribal capitalists and allied with the opposition Labour Party and the Greens—along with various Māori nationalist and middle class pseudo-left groups. The main

slogan, “Toitū te Tiriti” (Honour the Treaty)—which is being widely shared by liberal-minded people on social media—falsely presents the 1840 colonial document and the Waitangi Tribunal as the means for combatting racism and inequality.

The pro-business perspective of the protest leaders was summed up by Hone Harawira, a former MP for TPM and leader of its offshoot the Mana Party—at one time fraudulently portrayed as “left wing” by several pseudo-left groups.

In a speech at Waitangi, Harawira appealed to government ministers to reject ACT’s proposals and to “look for positivity in the development of iwi [tribal] businesses. Hell, they’re now generating billions of dollars for the New Zealand economy.” He pointed to the success of businesses that made use of Māori symbols and words, saying: “For God’s sake, Māori language is making money for you fellas!”

According to TDB Advisory, the country’s 10 biggest iwi/tribes have a combined asset base of more than \$8.1 billion. This has been built on the foundation of Treaty settlements, as well as ultra-low wages, a casualised and disposable workforce and repeated tax cuts and deregulation, which has fuelled speculation in property and other areas.

The sole concern of TPM and its allies is to protect and expand this wealth through the intensified exploitation of workers of all races. Their divisive demands for indigenous sovereignty and “self-determination”—including TPM’s call for a separate Māori parliament and its demand for tribes to be compensated for the use of New Zealand’s water and other resources—are geared towards this end.

As for Labour, it has no fundamental disagreement with the National government’s policy agenda, including the alliance with US imperialism and sweeping cuts to services that workers rely upon. For six years it led a government that oversaw soaring living costs and homelessness; in late 2021 it adopted the murderous “let it rip” policy, allowing COVID-19 to kill thousands of people; and it used the pandemic to transfer tens of billions of dollars to big business in the form of bailouts, tax breaks and ultra-low interest rates.

The Labour Party-Greens coalition government’s promotion of racial identity politics to benefit the tribes—including tribal “co-governance” of water infrastructure, a separate Māori health authority and reserved Māori seats on local councils—did nothing for working class Māori and played directly into the hands of the far-right parties, allowing them to posture as opponents of “separatism” and “division.”

Workers must reject both sides in this reactionary “debate” among the bourgeois parties. There can be no serious fight against racism outside of the political struggle to unite workers of every race and nationality based on their common class interests in order to abolish capitalism, which is the root cause of imperialist war and inequality, and to establish a socialist society.



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