

Five years since the Christchurch terror attack, many unanswered questions remain

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Yesterday marked five years since fascist terrorist Brenton Tarrant murdered 51 men, women and children, and injured 40 other people, in mass shootings at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand.

The March 15, 2019 terror attack was the country's worst mass shooting and one of the most deadly in the world. It horrified billions of people internationally and sparked mass demonstrations against racist violence.

The Christchurch attack also served as an inspiration for other fascist and white supremacist attacks, including the August 2019 massacre in El Paso and the May 2022 mass shooting in Buffalo, New York.

Five years later, however, basic questions remain unanswered about the attack. Discussion about the political and social environment that produced Tarrant, what groups and individuals he was connected with, and why the state did not prevent the massacre, has been deliberately suppressed by the political and media establishment.

Meanwhile, as US imperialism and its allies accelerate their drive towards world war, governments in New Zealand and Australia are lurching further to the right, stoking racism and militarism, which is fuelling the growth of extreme right-wing tendencies. They are supporting Israel's genocidal war against the Palestinian people in Gaza, and have sent troops to assist in training Ukrainian conscripts for the US-NATO proxy war against Russia.

Media coverage of the fifth anniversary in New Zealand mainly focused on the National Party-ACT-NZ First coalition government's plan to rewrite firearms legislation, which might permit greater access to semi-automatic rifles. Associate Justice Minister Nicole McKee, from the far-right ACT Party, is leading the review of the law; ACT was the only party that opposed the previous Labour Party-led government's ban on the military-style weapons used by Tarrant.

NZ Prime Minister Christopher Luxon privately met with families of the victims and issued brief public statements. "We remember the great courage and compassion from our Muslim community, that continues to this day," he said, adding that his government would continue implementing recommendations from the 2020 royal commission of inquiry into the attacks.

The Australian Labor government did not issue a statement and the media was almost completely silent on the fifth anniversary of the worst mass shooting committed by an Australian citizen.

Tarrant had connections with Australia's neo-Nazi Lads Society, now called the National Socialist Network, which tried to recruit him in 2017. The Australian fascists operate with impunity and protection from the state, while people protesting against the Gaza genocide are vilified and threatened.

Beginning just days after the massacre, Jacinda Ardern's Labour-led government in New Zealand, which included the Greens and the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, moved to construct a narrative that Tarrant had acted alone, and that his actions did not reflect anything about New Zealand society—despite the fact that he spent two years in NZ where he trained and bought weapons for the attack.

To shut down discussion, Ardern declared she would not speak about Tarrant and urged the media not to report on his views. For this, and for her various platitudes about the need for "love" and "kindness," Ardern was glorified as a sort of Mother Teresa figure by the world's media—which covered up the fact that her party ruled in a coalition with the anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim NZ First.

New Zealand's state censor outlawed possession of Tarrant's manifesto, which cannot be read by the public to this day. The purpose of this attack on democratic rights was to prevent the public from understanding the connection between Tarrant's anti-immigrant racism and the policies of the establishment capitalist parties in New Zealand, as well as internationally.

Tarrant's right-wing extremist and white supremacist views were spelled out in the manifesto, released online minutes before the attacks, which demonised Muslims and non-white immigrants. The document, titled "The Great Replacement," expressed admiration for US President Donald Trump and reflected hatred of immigrants that is widespread in the Republican Party and among far-right politicians including in Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Tarrant also noted that many right-wing extremists internationally were active in the armed forces of the state.

A guilty plea by Tarrant ensured that there was no trial where he could have been publicly questioned about who inspired his fascist ideology, how his attack was planned, whether he had accomplices, and what organisations he was involved in.

The royal commission of inquiry was conducted behind closed doors, and the vast majority of its evidence was kept secret, including an interview with Tarrant, and evidence submitted by the police and intelligence agencies. The commissioners' final report was a whitewash of the state agencies; it asserted that Tarrant

acted alone and there was no way he could have been stopped from carrying out his acts of mass murder.

The inquiry covered up the role of successive governments in stoking Islamophobia, including through their participation in the illegal US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The main recommendations from the inquiry related to strengthening the powers of the police and intelligence agencies, whose budgets and resources have been significantly expanded since 2019. Ardern, despite her sudden decision in January 2023 to retire from politics, continues to lead the so-called Christchurch Call initiative, which is coordinating with 130 governments and giant tech companies (including Meta, Amazon, Microsoft and Google) to censor so-called “violent extremist content” on the internet.

This has nothing to do with stopping terrorism. Rather its aim is to clamp down on opposition to war abroad, including the genocide in Gaza, and attacks on the working class at home.

Temel Ataöçü, a survivor who was shot nine times in the Christchurch attack, told the *Guardian* this week that there had been no accountability from government agencies. “Even some of the conclusions reached by the official inquiry—that the terrorist was a lone wolf and didn’t tell anyone what he planned to do—have been cast into doubt by new research this year that found online postings he made which had never come to light before. That needs more investigation,” he said.

Researchers from the University of Auckland recently uncovered online posts made by Tarrant on the 4chan website, making clear his intentions to attack mosques in New Zealand. The posts raised “serious questions, not only about why this posting was not detected before the attack, but also why it has not been discovered in the five years since the March 15 attacks.”

It beggars belief that the New Zealand intelligence agencies and the police, with all their resources, could not discover the public postings made by Tarrant, which have been found by a small group of academic researchers. At the very least, it is clear that the authorities turned a blind eye to his activities.

In 2016, he was reported to police in Australia for sending a death threat to someone on Facebook, but no action was taken. The following year, a member of the Bruce Rifle Club, where Tarrant trained for his attack, warned New Zealand police about violent and racist language used by some of the club’s members. The royal commission repeated the claims made by police that they never received such a report.

In addition to his links to Australian fascists, Tarrant corresponded with and donated to far-right organisations in Europe and North America, and travelled widely, including to Ukraine and other parts of Eastern Europe. The commissioners made the unsubstantiated assertion that he had no contact with far-right groups during his travels, despite visiting areas where they are known to be active. In fact, Tarrant’s mother told Australian police that he had attended a right-wing gathering in Poland.

A coronial inquiry into the attacks has yet to release its findings, but its scope specifically excluded the question of whether there were “missed opportunities by intelligence, counter-terrorism agencies and other public sector agencies” to stop Tarrant.

Meanwhile, Ataöçü said he no longer feels safe in New

Zealand, adding “I don’t leave the house unless I have to.” Apart from the gun law changes, he struggled to think of any other change since 2019 that had made the country safer. Like other survivors he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, but is forced to get a medical certificate every three months “to prove I am still unable to work due to PTSD so that I qualify for income support.”

According to the Islamic Women’s Council, data from the police shows that more than one third of online hate is directed towards Muslim women, who make up less than 1 percent of the country’s population.

The threat from the far-right is increasing worldwide, rooted in the crisis of capitalism, which has worsened dramatically in the five years since the Christchurch terror attack. To protect and expand their wealth, the imperialist powers, led by the United States, are unleashing violence across the world. The ruling class is promoting extreme nationalism, xenophobia and racism to divide the working class, to prepare for war, and to defend unprecedented levels of social inequality.

In the coming election in the United States, voters have a “choice” between Biden, a supporter of genocide, and the fascist Donald Trump. Biden is collaborating with the Republicans, adopting their vicious anti-immigrant agenda, which is based on the same “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory espoused by Tarrant.

In Germany, there have been mass protests against the fascist AfD, which plays a major role in politics; Italy is led by the neo-fascist Georgia Meloni; Geert Wilders’ anti-Muslim Freedom Party is now the largest party in the Dutch parliament; in India, the Hindu supremacist Narendra Modi, known for inciting violence against Muslims, is being courted by Biden and other world leaders.

The lessons of history, including the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s, demonstrate that fascism cannot be stopped by appealing to capitalist politicians. This includes the governments in Australia and New Zealand, which have embraced the far-right, genocidal regime in Israel, and are cracking down on the rights of immigrants and stoking racist divisions at home.

Fascism can only be stopped by a revolutionary movement of the international working class to put an end to the capitalist system, which is its root cause. The repressive organs of the state—the military, the police, the border patrol and intelligence agencies—which protect and encourage the extreme right, must be abolished. The extraordinary wealth and power of the super-rich, which is fundamentally incompatible with democracy, must be expropriated and placed under the control of workers’ governments, as part of the socialist reorganisation of society.



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