

Furore over racial “segregation” at New Zealand university

Tom Peters
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On March 26, the far-right ACT Party, part of New Zealand’s coalition government, denounced the University of Auckland for placing an official sign outside a designated area in its Business School, which stated: “This is a Designated Area for Māori and Pasifika [Pacific Island] Students. Thank You.” A photo of the sign had been shared on a Reddit forum, provoking numerous comments for and against the racially segregated study space.

ACT MP Parmjeet Parmar said: “Blocking access to spaces based on ethnicity has an ugly past and has no future in New Zealand.” Parmar has written to the country’s universities and polytechnics asking them to provide a list of such spaces and explain the rationale for them.

Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, from the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, issued an inflammatory statement comparing the university sign to the Ku Klux Klan, “apartheid South Africa, and the segregation days in the United States.” He denounced universities for “woke cultural brainwashing... dangerous rhetoric and demonstrable race-based practices.”

Prime Minister Christopher Luxon agreed with his far-right allies, stating: “There is no place for discrimination or segregation in New Zealand. Universities should be places of inclusion, not exclusion.”

The uproar, which dominated the media for several days, is part of a strategy by the government to inflame racial tensions and thus divert attention from its brutal austerity measures to make the working class pay for the recession. These include thousands of public sector redundancies, cuts to social welfare, continued underfunding of the crisis-ridden health system, reduced funding for disability programs, and plans to cut funding for school lunches.

The government is capitalising on widespread hostility towards identity politics, which is heavily promoted by Labour, the Greens and Te Pahi Māori. The so-called “safe spaces” at universities are one component of this reactionary agenda, which seeks to divide up the population into antagonistic racial and cultural identities.

In the universities, the obsessive focus on the politics of

race, gender and sexuality, underpinned by postmodernist theory, serves to turn young people away from the Marxist understanding of history and the class struggle—that is, the historic struggle to unify the working class, of every ethnicity and nationality, in the fight for socialism. At the same time, institutions like the Auckland University Business School offer scholarships and affirmative action programs to recruit Māori students to become part of the political and corporate elite.

To the extent that these policies are incorrectly seen as “left wing,” they play directly into the hands of the far-right, allowing NZ First and ACT to hypocritically posture as the defenders of “equality” even as the government’s policies push more and more working people into poverty.

The latest denunciations of “segregation” follow Peters’ recent speech in which he railed against “woke cultural Marxism” and compared the previous government to “Nazi Germany” because of its promotion of identity politics. They also follow a witch-hunt by ACT and NZ First against Victoria University of Wellington academic Joanna Kidman for speaking out against the government’s reactionary “law and order” policies and its cuts to school lunches.

The attack on Auckland University, in the lead-up to the government’s May budget, is clearly intended to condition public opinion for more cutbacks. Under the previous Labour Party-led government, funding was frozen across the tertiary sector, resulting in hundreds of job cuts over the past three years. Auckland University is proposing to merge a number of different arts departments into a single faculty, and there is also a proposal to merge the architecture and design programs—all of which will likely result in more job losses and fewer study options.

ACT and NZ First’s outcry over “race-based practices” is utterly hypocritical. NZ First also has a long record of racist agitation against immigrants, especially those from China, India, and Muslim countries. In his speech last month, Peters railed against the “uncontrollable level of new migrants entering our country,” which he called the “most awful thing to happen.” NZ First member Shane Jones has called on

Māori tribal leaders to join him in a fight to stop immigration, which he says is diluting the status of the Māori race.

The ACT Party never misses an opportunity to fraudulently depict indigenous Māori as a “privileged” section of society. This is the purpose of ACT’s push for a referendum to define the principles of the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, which the party claims has been misused to give special rights to Māori that white people supposedly do not possess. In reality, apart from a small number of Māori capitalists cultivated by successive Labour and National Party governments, the majority of indigenous Māori (who are about 15 percent of the population) and Pacific Islanders are in the most exploited section of the working class.

The positions of Labour, the Greens and Te Pāti Māori (TPM), it must be stressed, are just as reactionary and divisive as those of the government. All of them, along with the Tertiary Education Union (TEU), have all lined up in support of Auckland University’s racially segregated spaces.

Labour MP Willie Jackson, for example, told Newshub that the spaces had been there 30 years ago when he was a student because “universities have an obligation to look after minorities, to look after women, to look after rainbow, to look after Pasifika, to look after Māori.”

The Green Party’s Hōhāna Lyndon similarly told *Stuff*: “We support designated safe spaces for tauira [students] to gather to freely express themselves and their cultural practices in an academic setting.”

TPM’s Tūtaka Ferris told the media: “Creating safe spaces to empower minority communities to thrive and achieve whilst creating a sense of interconnectedness should be celebrated.”

TEU president Dr Julie Douglas said such spaces allowed students to “freely express their lived experiences in a safe and supportive environment with those of a similar world view.”

All these professions of concern for student “safety” and “supportive” learning environments are sheer hypocrisy. The last Labour government, which included the Greens, oversaw the destruction of hundreds of jobs and numerous courses across the tertiary sector. The redundancies were imposed with the assistance of the TEU.

As for Jackson’s comments about the need to “look after” Māori and Pacific people, the Labour-led government did precisely the opposite. It oversaw an increase in poverty and inequality, as well as homelessness—all of which has a disproportionate impact on Māori and Pacific islanders, who are among the most impoverished members of society.

The assertion by Labour and its supporters that “safe spaces” are needed to protect Māori and Pacific students is partly intended to distract attention from Labour’s

reactionary record. It amounts to a slander against students and staff from other ethnicities, who are implicitly smeared as racists.

Even if it could be shown that there is widespread racism at universities, creating designated areas for particular racial groups would only make matters worse. Racial segregation in New Zealand has historically been used to oppress Māori. For much of the 20th century, segregation was widely practised by businesses, government agencies, landlords, schools and employers. While these practices are now officially banned, there is no doubt that racial discrimination continues in many areas, against Māori and other groups, especially highly-exploited migrant workers.

The positions of Labour and company have a thoroughly reactionary logic, which if followed consistently would necessitate segregated spaces for Chinese, Indian, African and other ethnicities that experience racism and xenophobia. And why stop at universities? Why not implement “safe spaces” in primary and secondary schools, factories and other workplaces, public transport, museums, libraries—in short, anywhere that people of different ethnicities currently mix together?

Students and young people should reject both sides in the reactionary “safe spaces” debate: the overt racism of the government and the divisive identity politics of the opposition parties. The aim of the capitalist class and its parliamentary parties is to derail any campaign against the destruction of education and other public services by encouraging a fight for dwindling resources among different ethnic and racial groups.

The fight against this agenda of austerity and war requires the unification of working people—of every ethnicity and nationality, and across all countries—based on their shared class interests, in a political struggle to abolish capitalism and establish a socialist society. The resources of society, which are hoarded by the super-rich and squandered on the military, must be redirected into vital public services, including schools and universities to provide free, high-quality and accessible university education for all.



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