

New Zealand survey finds 65 percent agree the economy is “rigged to advantage the rich and powerful”

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A survey of 1,001 people in New Zealand has found widespread anger over social inequality, distrust of the political establishment, and opposition to the running down of public services and increased military spending.

The “Populism Survey” by global market research company Ipsos has been conducted since 2016, with 28 countries surveyed during November-December 2023 (including Britain, the US, Japan, Germany, Australia, South Africa, and other countries in Europe, Asia and Latin America). New Zealand was surveyed for the first time in February 2024.

The Ipsos findings point to growing anti-capitalist sentiments in the working class across the world. This is the result of years of soaring living costs, the never-ending COVID-19 pandemic, crumbling social infrastructure, the vast concentration of wealth in the hands of a small number of billionaires, and the diversion of more and more resources towards imperialist war, including the Gaza genocide and the war in Ukraine.

In the case of New Zealand, the results confirm that there is no popular support for the vicious austerity program being imposed by the National Party-led government, which is backed in all fundamental respects by the opposition Labour Party.

Nearly two thirds of respondents, 65 percent, agreed that “New Zealand’s economy is rigged to advantage the rich and powerful” (similar to the 67 percent average result for the other 28 countries). Only 17 percent disagreed with the statement.

Last year, the Inland Revenue Department reported that the country’s 311 richest individuals pay less than half the rate of tax paid by workers. This layer has

profited from soaring property prices, stock market speculation, and tax breaks and bailouts under successive Labour and National governments. Meanwhile one in five children lives in poverty and more than one in ten people depend on food banks.

More than half of respondents, 55 percent, agreed that “traditional parties and politicians don’t care about people like me” (only 18 percent disagreed) and 63 percent agreed that “the political and economic elite don’t care about hard-working people.”

In another indication of distrust for politicians, 57 percent endorsed the statement: “The most important political issues in New Zealand should be decided directly by the people through referendums, not by the elected officials.” The figure was higher for people aged under 35 (62 percent), the unemployed (63 percent) and Māori (70 percent).

The October 2023 election showed that all the major parties are deeply unpopular. Amid widespread abstention the Labour Party-led government suffered a landslide defeat, following six years in which it oversaw rising homelessness, soaring living costs and increased poverty. The National Party only received 38 percent and had to form an unstable coalition government with the far-right ACT and NZ First parties.

Significantly, 60 percent of those surveyed agreed that “the main divide in [New Zealand] society is between ordinary citizens and the political and economic elite.” Among “low income” respondents, 69 percent agreed, and among indigenous Māori, who are predominantly in the poorest layer of the working class, 78 percent agreed.

These results come despite strenuous efforts by the

government, as well as the opposition Labour Party and its allies the Greens and Te P?ti M?ori, to stoke divisions based on race in order to divert attention from the gulf between rich and poor. Working people correctly identify the “main divide” not as race, gender, nationality, religion or any other identity category, but the *class* divide between workers and the super-rich.

The survey indicates that efforts by NZ First, Labour and other parties, along with sections of the media, to scapegoat immigrants for the social crisis, have had a limited effect. Some 29 percent of respondents agreed with the statement: “Immigrants take jobs away from real New Zealanders,” and 23 percent agreed that the country “would be stronger if we stopped immigration.”

While these figures are not insignificant, anti-immigrant sentiment is lower in New Zealand than in most of the other countries surveyed. Approximately one in four people living in New Zealand were born overseas and roughly one in six citizens lives outside the country; the global mobility of the working class has undermined the ruling elite’s promotion of nationalist prejudices.

Ipsos also asked where people thought the government should spend more money.

Most significantly, 68 percent of New Zealand respondents opposed greater spending on the armed forces, while only 28 percent said it should increase—the lowest figure out of all countries surveyed.

This finding will undoubtedly cause concern in ruling circles. The major parties, backed by the corporate media, are pushing to double New Zealand’s military budget, as the country is integrated into US-led wars against Russia, in the Middle East, and preparations for conflict with China.

Deep-seated opposition to war has erupted to the surface, with thousands of workers and young people regularly joining protests against the genocide in Gaza, in which New Zealand is complicit as an ally of US imperialism.

While opposing military spending, 65 percent said the government should spend more on “reducing inequality and poverty,” 55 percent wanted more spent on “creating jobs,” 71 percent backed increased funding for schools and universities, and 83 percent supported more public money for healthcare.

The government, however, is committed to brutal

austerity in all these areas. Public services are being gutted, in order to fund the military build-up and cut taxes for the rich. Thousands of jobs are being eliminated from government ministries, including education, child welfare and conservation. Social welfare payments and the minimum wage are being reduced, along with the food in schools program.

The working class is on a collision course with the government and the corporate elite, as well as the trade union bureaucracy, which is collaborating with the destruction of jobs and has suppressed opposition to the sweeping attacks on living standards.

For the working class to mobilise its power, it will have to rebel against the trade unions by organising independent rank-and-file committees in schools, hospitals and other workplaces.

In opposition to the ruling elite’s plans for increased spending on war, and the efforts to divide workers based on race and nationality, workers should adopt a socialist program: for the unification of working people internationally to abolish capitalism and to establish a workers’ government.

The vast wealth hoarded by the rich, and the money being funnelled into the military, must be redistributed to build hospitals, schools, and to fund other vital services and to put an end to poverty and inequality. We urge those who agree with this goal to contact the Socialist Equality Group.



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