

New Zealand May Day rallies seek to cover up union complicity with austerity

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's Council of Trade Unions and a number of affiliated unions held protest rallies yesterday in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, ostensibly to celebrate May Day, the international day of workers' solidarity.

In 1913, when the imperialist powers were preparing for world war, the revolutionary leader Rosa Luxemburg described the idea of May Day as “the autonomous, immediate stepping forward of the proletarian masses, the political mass action of the millions of workers,” utilising “the strike as a demonstration and means of struggle for the eight-hour day, world peace, and socialism.”

This is the polar opposite of what the New Zealand union bureaucracy organised. The unions' aim is to prevent any mobilisation of the working class against austerity and the integration of New Zealand into US imperialist plans for a devastating Third World War.

The May Day rallies were designed to bolster illusions in the opposition Labour Party, which suffered a devastating defeat in the October 2023 election after leading the government for six years and overseeing increased poverty and homelessness.

Labour has no fundamental disagreement with the attacks being carried out by the National Party-led government, which includes the far-right ACT and NZ First Parties. The ruling class is imposing the full burden of the economic recession on workers, while diverting billions of dollars to significantly increase military spending and cut taxes for the rich.

In the capital, Wellington, a lunch-hour protest attracted perhaps 250 people—a large proportion of them union officials and members of the Labour and Green Parties and pseudo-left groups. Similar events were held in the other major cities.

FIRST Union and Unite reportedly held stop-work meetings lasting about two hours, involving mainly retail and hospitality workers. The Public Service Association

(PSA) did not call any strike action, despite the government's announcement in recent weeks of approximately 3,500 job cuts across the public service, with more to come.

None of the speakers at the Wellington rally said a word about the government's support for the US-NATO war against Russia, the build-up to war against China, and participation in the US bombing of Yemen to protect supply lines for Israel's genocide in Gaza. Labour supports this imperialist agenda: Andrew Little, the last government's defence minister, said the armed forces needed to be “equipped and prepared” for a possible war in the South China Sea.

No perspective was presented to fight the government's attacks. A total of 7,500 public sector job cuts are planned, affecting dozens of departments, including education, child welfare services, conservation, statistics gathering and customs. Businesses are also cutting jobs: unemployment increased from 4 to 4.3 percent in the first three months of 2023. To drive down wages, the government has lowered the minimum wage—raising it by 2 percent while inflation is twice that high.

More cuts are being imposed in the crisis-ridden public hospital system, where there is already a shortage of roughly 5,000 nurses and 1,700 doctors. Junior doctors have voted for a one-day strike on May 7.

FIRST Union presented three resolutions at the rallies, which did not commit the unions to any meaningful actions. The first vaguely called for the Council of Trade Unions to “campaign for alternatives to the government's economic agenda.” The second urged the Labour Party and its allies, the Greens and Te P?ti M?ori, to “effectively raise the issues and concerns affecting working people, develop alternative policies” and oppose laws that would negatively impact workers. The third resolution simply called for more demonstrations on future May Days.

Duane Leo, the PSA's co-national secretary, addressed the Wellington gathering, criticising the “thousands of cuts” by the government. He claimed that the union was doing “a huge amount” to campaign against them, without elaborating.

In fact, the PSA agrees with spending cuts and is helping to implement them. When the Labour government announced last August that it would significantly reduce spending in government departments, Leo told Radio NZ the union would assist in making “savings,” including redundancies. PSA assistant secretary Fleur Fitzsimons told RNZ this morning that the union was supporting dozens of “voluntary” redundancies at Statistics NZ.

Labour MP Camilla Belich was also given the platform. She criticised the government for extending “90-day trials, meaning that people can be sacked for absolutely no reason in the first 90 days of their employment.” She did not explain why the 2017–2023 Labour government retained the 90-day law for small businesses (now being expanded to cover all businesses).

Belich attacked the government for scrapping Labour's misnamed “Fair Pay Agreements” legislation. This corporatist mechanism would have allowed unions to negotiate with employers and the state to set minimum wage rates across entire industries. The CTU pledged to enforce a strike ban during the negotiations.

She also spruiked a law change proposed by Labour MPs to create the new offence of “corporate manslaughter,” saying too many people were being “killed at work.” The last Labour government, backed by the Greens and the union bureaucracy, showed their real contempt for workers' safety when they shut down the underground investigation into the 2010 Pike River mine disaster, in order to prevent anyone being held accountable for the avoidable deaths of 29 workers.

The Labour-Greens government, which also included NZ First from 2017–2020, oversaw an increase in homelessness and child poverty. It distributed tens of billions of dollars to big business in the form of bailouts, tax breaks and subsidies, while healthcare was starved of resources and all COVID-19 public health measures were removed.

The working class now faces a rapidly worsening social crisis. More than 1 in 10 people are reliant on food banks. According to credit rating agency Centrix, 463,000 people (about 1 in 9) were behind on debt repayments as of March—7.4 percent more than at the same time last year.

These conditions are leading to deepening anti-capitalist sentiments in the working class. At the rally in

Wellington, Jackie, who works at Bunnings, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that six members of her family, including her daughter, are set to lose their jobs in the government's austerity drive. Her daughter, who has a child, may need to leave her flat and move back home to survive economically. Jackie said she was “definitely” in favour of strike action against the government.

The May Day events, however, underscore that a fight against austerity and militarism requires a political break from the Labour Party, the Greens and Te P?ti M?ori, and a rebellion against the union bureaucracy. The unions ceased to be workers' organisations decades ago: they are staffed by an affluent bureaucracy committed to the defence of capitalism, which acts as a police force imposing attacks on the working class.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers to build rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions and the capitalist parties. Such organisations will provide the means for uniting workers in New Zealand and internationally to shut down the production and shipment of weapons for Israel's genocide, and to organise mass strikes.

These actions must be linked with an international strategy to abolish capitalism and replace it with a socialist society. The vast wealth and resources controlled by the rich must be placed under public ownership and workers' control. This is the only way to end poverty and war, and to address catastrophic climate change and stop the COVID pandemic.

This is the revolutionary perspective that will be presented at the International May Day Online Rally hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site*, on Sunday May 5 at 7:00 a.m. New Zealand time. We urge workers in New Zealand and throughout the Asia-Pacific region to attend this critical event.



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