

Former New Zealand PM Jacinda Ardern joins pro-war US think tank

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Last month the major Democratic Party-aligned think tank in Washington, the Center for American Progress (CAP), announced that former New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern will launch a new leadership program as part of the Center's Global Progress Action initiative.

In a June 17 Instagram post, Ardern wrote that the 12-month program, called the Field Fellowship, "supports and connects global political leaders who embody political leadership that draws on the strength of kindness and empathy.... [It] will create a network of like-minded political leaders who use pragmatic idealism, speak to people with hope and optimism rather than fear or blame, and want to unite, rather than divide as we look to solve the challenges ahead."

She declared that it was part of her "mission to help rehumanise leadership, and just be useful!"

CAP's chief executive Patrick Gaspard stated that the inaugural fellowship, "beginning this summer, is expected to include women in leadership roles from different European countries." He said the program would counter the "rise of authoritarianism and the growing influence of the far right in Europe" by helping to "shape the ideas that will steer Europe toward a more hopeful, unifying, and optimistic future."

Beyond these statements, no details have been released about precisely what the Field Fellowship will do and who will participate. One can say with certainty, however, that its stated aim of opposing the far-right is a sham. The program will train political leaders in how to emulate Ardern's use of gender identity politics and empty rhetoric about "kindness and empathy" to mask the reactionary and authoritarian agenda of the ruling classes.

The portrayal of Ardern in the corporate media as a "progressive" figure is a fraud. Her 2017-2023 Labour Party-led government was, by any objective measure, one of the most right wing in New Zealand's history: it strengthened New Zealand's alliance with US imperialism, while overseeing a massive transfer of wealth to the rich during the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In every country in Europe and the US, governments of every colouration are carrying out deep attacks on workers' living standards and democratic rights, while building up their militaries, supporting genocide in Gaza, the escalating the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and the build-up to a US-led war against China. Ardern's Field Fellowship is part of the increasingly desperate attempts to put a "human face" on a system that is careening towards dictatorship and world war.

A center for war propaganda

Ardern is joining an organisation described by Politico in 2021 as "the most influential think tank of the Biden era." The CAP is basically an adjunct of the Democratic Party, the party of Wall Street and the military. Its CEO Gaspard served as executive director of the Democratic National Committee from 2011-13, overseeing the efforts to re-elect President Barack Obama.

The CAP has received tens of millions of dollars from corporations and

the super-rich, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, Amazon, billionaire Michael Bloomberg and Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, along with many others.

Johan Hassel, the director of the CAP's Global Progress initiative—of which Ardern's fellowship is part—was the international secretary of the Swedish Social Democratic Party from 2018-2022 and is described on the CAP website as "a senior figure in Swedish and European politics." Significantly, his profile also boasts that he "served in the Swedish Armed Forces and the Kosovo Force"—the NATO-led forces stationed in the imperialist puppet state of Kosovo, which was created through NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999.

Throughout its 20-year history the CAP has specialized in the production of "humanitarian" propaganda for war. It criticized the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq in 2003 on the grounds that it was a diversion from the equally criminal war against Afghanistan, which the CAP endorsed. It likewise supported NATO's regime change war in Libya in 2011 and the Obama administration's arming of Islamist "rebels" in the Syrian civil war. All these wars, justified on the pretext of fighting against "terrorism" and for "democracy," cost hundreds of thousands of lives and devastated entire societies.

In response to Ardern's post announcing the Field Fellowship, several commenters pointed out the blatant hypocrisy of talking about "empathy and kindness" while refusing to condemn the Israel-US genocide in Gaza. The political leaders who take part in her program will be from countries that are actively supporting and providing political cover for the genocide.

The CAP supports the arming of Israel as Washington's attack dog in the Middle East, and has a record of whitewashing the oppression of the Palestinian people. In November 2015, the CAP hosted a discussion with Israel's fascist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, during which CAP president Neera Tanden presented him as the leader of a "democracy... [that] shares values with democracies around the world." She also hailed Israel's military for being "very inclusive" of women and gay people. This was one year after Operation Protective Edge, Israel's brutal bombing of the Gaza Strip, which slaughtered more than 2,300 people.

On October 14, 2023, chief executive Gaspard released a statement endorsing Israel's genocidal attack on Gaza. He said President Biden was "right to affirm support for Israel as it responds to monstrous acts of terror," while cynically adding that "US leaders must insist on compliance with international law." Subsequent CAP statements have echoed the Biden administration's meaningless calls for a ceasefire, while advocating the ongoing provision of weapons to Israel. Washington has enabled Israel to kill more than 40,000 people and bomb cities into rubble, along with almost all hospitals and schools, and to block the delivery of aid, inflicting mass starvation on hundreds of thousands of people.

When the CAP says it wants to stop "the rise of authoritarianism," what this actually means is defeating the main rivals of US imperialism, especially Russia and America's principal economic adversary, China.

In April, the CAP published a report on "managing tensions with

China,” which urged the Biden administration to “invest in practical battlefield technology and revamp our advanced manufacturing sector to build a defense ecosystem.” It called for sending more weapons to Taiwan, which is a key part of Washington’s efforts to provoke China into starting an all-out war.

The CAP calls for escalating the war in Ukraine, which has already killed and maimed an estimated 500,000 people. It has demanded more funding for the Zelensky regime and insisted that Russia must suffer a decisive military defeat before there can be talk of peace. By pouring tens of billions of dollars in military aid into Ukraine, the US and NATO are not defending “democracy,” but an extreme right-wing dictatorship that works closely with fascist forces, and is persecuting anti-war activists, including the socialist Bogdan Syrotiuk who has been thrown in prison for his writings on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The war is spiraling out of control, as the NATO powers discuss plans to place their economies on a war footing and to send troops to Ukraine, while missile strikes inside Russian territory are raising the threat of a nuclear exchange.

Far from combating the extreme right, the parties promoted by the CAP—the Democrats in the US and the social democratic and Labour parties internationally—have paved the way for these forces. Donald Trump in the US, Marine Le Pen in France and Italy’s Giorgia Meloni have all been able to pose as “anti-establishment” by exploiting widespread anger and disillusionment with the brutal policies of austerity and militarism imposed by supposedly “progressive” or “liberal” capitalist governments.

On every major issue—including war, attacks on immigrants, cuts to welfare and healthcare, the erosion of democratic rights, and the policy of mass COVID-19 infection—Biden’s administration has sought to appease and collaborate with the Republican right. The same basic tendency can be seen in New Zealand under the last Labour government led by Ardern.

Ardern’s record

Ardern is joining the CAP at a time of mass popular opposition to the Gaza genocide and to anti-democratic forms of rule internationally. Her job will be to train politicians to bring this movement under control and to subordinate workers and youth to political forces that uphold NATO’s militarist agenda. This is the role that Ardern has played throughout her political career.

Ardern’s supposedly “empathetic” leadership has been glorified in the international media for years, especially following her response to the Christchurch terrorist attack on March 15, 2019, in which the fascist Brenton Tarrant murdered 51 people at two mosques. According to the media narrative, Ardern’s “kindness” brought the nation together and inspired the world. She was hailed as the antithesis of right-wing leaders such as Trump, who was one of Tarrant’s heroes.

Fawning articles in the *New York Times* and elsewhere omitted any mention of the fact that Ardern’s Labour Party and its ally the Greens were only able to form a government in 2017–2020 in a coalition with the right-wing, racist New Zealand First Party. NZ First leader Winston Peters, notorious for his anti-Muslim and anti-China rants, was made deputy prime minister and foreign minister by Ardern.

The 2017 coalition deal was supported by US ambassador Scott Brown, who made clear that Washington saw Labour-NZ First as a more reliable government to integrate New Zealand into US war plans against China.

The Labour-NZ First government declared that China and Russia represented the main “threats” to the world order; boosted New Zealand’s participation in US-led military exercises in the Indo-Pacific region; and sent troops to Britain to assist in training Ukrainian conscripts to fight against Russia. Last August, Labour’s Defence Minister Andrew Little declared that the military had to be “equipped and prepared” to join a possible war in the South China Sea, i.e., against China.

The state has suppressed any discussion of the political environment that

led to the March 2019 attack—including the racism and anti-Muslim sentiments encouraged by successive Labour and National Party governments to justify their participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many questions remain about why the state did not stop Tarrant and whether he had accomplices.

The Ardern government exploited the attack as the pretext to expand the intelligence agencies and to promote censorship. In May 2019, Ardern partnered with French President Emmanuel Macron to launch a global initiative, the Christchurch Call to Action, which brought together governments and tech giants—including Microsoft, Amazon, Meta, Google and YouTube—ostensibly to stop the spread of “violent extremist content” online.

The Christchurch Call indicates the sort of initiatives that the Field Fellowship will advocate for Europe. It has nothing to do with combating the far-right or preventing terrorist attacks. Its aim is to establish a framework for censorship, on an international scale, of any online content that governments decide to label extremist.

In a speech to the UN in 2022, Ardern linked the Christchurch Call directly to the war against Russia, saying it was necessary to stop online platforms from being used as “weapons of war” to spread “disinformation,” “cause chaos and reduce the ability of others to defend themselves.” The speech was an argument for censoring any opposition to the US-NATO war effort.

Ardern’s partnership with Macron is particularly revealing. His government has used police state measures to crush a mass movement of the working class against pension cuts and other attacks. With his party facing defeat in the current French parliamentary elections, Macron is threatening to assume dictatorial emergency powers to enforce deeply unpopular austerity measures and to send French troops into Ukraine.

Ardern stepped down as prime minister in early 2023 and left parliament in April that year. She then began two fellowships at Harvard University, focused on political leadership and countering online extremism, which appear to have been preparation for her role at the Center for American Progress.

The reasons behind Ardern’s departure and her replacement by Chris Hipkins have never been fully explained; at the time Ardern lamely declared that she did not have enough energy to continue as prime minister.

Her resignation, however, came as the working class was turning against Labour. Ardern’s 2017 rhetoric about addressing the housing crisis was revealed to be a fraud, with homelessness becoming more entrenched; and the soaring cost of living was forcing hundreds of thousands of people to rely on food banks to survive. Despite Ardern making herself the minister for child poverty reduction, child poverty actually increased during her government.

Labour’s support began to decline sharply after Ardern scrapped the country’s popular elimination strategy for COVID-19 at the end of 2021, and adopted the policy of mass infection demanded by big business, which had already caused millions of deaths worldwide. Thousands of people died in the following year and the New Zealand healthcare system was overwhelmed with COVID cases.

Labour lost the October 2023 election, with just over half the votes it received in 2020, opening the door for a coalition of the conservative National Party government and the far-right ACT and New Zealand First parties. This deeply unpopular coalition is picking up where Labour left off: it is further strengthening military ties with the US, Britain, Australia and Japan against Russia and China; supporting the genocide in Gaza; and imposing savage austerity measures in healthcare, education and social welfare.

Ardern’s entire career, culminating in her recruitment by one of the main think tanks for US imperialism, vindicates the warnings made by the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) and the WSWWS since 2017. In opposition

to all the middle class, pseudo-left organisations which promoted Ardern and Labour—including the International Socialist Organisation and Socialist Aotearoa—the SEG explained that her pledges to address poverty were worthless, and that Labour was an imperialist party that would deepen the drive towards war.

Workers and young people who are moving to the left must draw decisive political lessons from the experience of the Ardern years. Above all: the fight against genocide, war and the assault on living standards, must be built in opposition to Labour and all its allies, including the Greens and pseudo-lefts. It must be based on a socialist program, aimed at mobilising the working class throughout the world against the capitalist system that is the root cause of war, fascism and inequality.



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