

New Zealand government's Treaty of Waitangi "debate" stokes racial divisions

Tom Peters

23 September 2024

New Zealand's right-wing coalition government—which consists of the National Party, the nationalist NZ First Party and the libertarian ACT Party—is ramping up its efforts to stoke racial divisions and animosity towards indigenous Māori.

The ACT Party, which got just 8.6 percent in last year's election, is leading the charge. It is proposing to legislate a set of "principles" that would reinterpret the Treaty of Waitangi, which it claims has been misused by successive governments to give indigenous Māori a "privileged" status.

In fact, Māori, who make up about 15 percent of the population, are mostly among the poorest members of society. They have higher rates of unemployment, lower life expectancy and worse health, are more likely to live in substandard housing, and face discrimination from police and the legal system.

The government is seeking to use Māori as scapegoats for the worsening social crisis that it is inflicting on the entire working class. In response to the most severe global economic downturn in decades, the government has cut taxes for the rich while imposing deeply unpopular austerity measures, including cuts to healthcare, education and social welfare. Tens of thousands of people are losing their jobs, and costs are soaring for housing, transport, food, fuel and everything else. At the same time, billions of dollars are being spent on the military in preparation to join US-led imperialist wars.

The government and the opposition parties—Labour, the Greens and Te Pāti Māori—have no progressive solution to rising poverty and inequality, and are all deeply unpopular. The National and NZ First Parties have agreed to support ACT's legislation, at least in its first reading in parliament, in order to divert attention and anger away from their own responsibility for rapidly deteriorating living standards.

The focus of political debate is the Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 by representatives of the British Empire and hundreds of Māori tribal leaders. It promised that the tribes would retain control of their lands and resources, and that the indigenous people would have all the rights of British

citizens in return for allowing Britain to govern the country.

The treaty was a fraud: it was used to deceive the tribes while the colonial government amassed troops in New Zealand to conquer the land using military force, duplicity and legalised theft. By the end of the 19th century, the tribes had lost nearly all their land.

During the 1970s and especially the 1980s, successive governments revived the Treaty, elevating it to the status of a national "founding document" that supposedly laid the basis for harmonious relations between Māori and Europeans. The Waitangi Tribunal was created in 1975 to make recommendations on redressing breaches of the treaty. This was aimed at preventing a unified struggle by Māori and non-Māori workers against capitalism, by persuading Māori that their grievances could be addressed by working within the framework of the Tribunal.

Since the 1980s, when the ruling class launched an onslaught of privatisations and mass redundancies as it restructured the economy in favour of the financial elite, National Party and Labour Party-led governments have paid hundreds of millions of dollars to the tribes in "Treaty settlements," which have been glorified as the means to eliminate poverty and racial inequity. In fact, this process has created multi-billion dollar tribal businesses with interests in property, agriculture, fisheries and tourism, while doing nothing for the vast majority of Māori.

The ACT Party does not intend to roll back any of this; the party voted in favour of all the treaty settlements. ACT says it wants to abolish the notion, mentioned in some pieces of legislation, that the Treaty created a "partnership" between the state and the Māori people as a whole.

ACT's "Treaty Principles Bill" consists of three principles: 1) the government rules on behalf of everyone in accordance with "a free and democratic society"; 2) the law recognises the rights of tribes who signed the treaty, and recognises the treaty settlements; and 3) everyone is equal before the law and has the same human rights.

The treaty.nz website, set up by ACT to promote the Bill, complains that "the courts and the Waitangi Tribunal have

steadily pushed the boundaries of what is meant by Treaty principles and partnership,” including a 2019 Supreme Court ruling that the government had a duty to protect tribal economic development.

Significant material interests are involved in this debate. The government has the support of sections of New Zealand business who are in competition with the tribes for lucrative government contracts and resources. The coalition has scrapped a policy of the previous Labour government that required all government departments to ensure that at least 8 percent of their annual procurement contracts went to M?ori businesses.

At the same time, ACT and NZ First are deliberately inflaming racial tensions by claiming that M?ori as a whole have enjoyed a special status above everyone else. In parliament on September 11, for instance, ACT leader David Seymour declared that he was opposing a system “where people have different rights, based on their background and their ancestry, because they’re in a partnership between races.”

The talk from Seymour and NZ First leader Winston Peters about wanting to restore “equality” is nothing but lies and hypocrisy. These politicians are eviscerating social programs and widening the gulf between rich and poor.

A case in point is the crisis-ridden healthcare system. On September 10, the government instructed the Hawke’s Bay local health authority to stop providing free doctor’s visits for M?ori and Pacific young people aged 14 to 24. Prime Minister Christopher Luxon declared that this was “out of line, out of order” and that healthcare should be based on “need, not ethnicity or race.”

A few days later the government issued a directive to all public agencies stating that “the targeting, commissioning and design of public services should be based on the needs of all New Zealanders... regardless of ethnicity or personal identity.”

This is a complete sham. Instead of restoring free doctor’s visits for all young people, Hawke’s Bay has now scrapped the service for everyone except the very poor, citing the lack of public healthcare funding.

Access to healthcare is profoundly unequal: its delivery is not based on need, but on the patient’s ability to pay. Successive governments, led by Labour and National, have created a two-tier system where the very rich can access the best care money can buy, while hundreds of thousands of working class people can no longer afford to see a doctor.

The identity politics promoted by Labour and its allies has played directly into the hands of the far-right. While starving healthcare services of funding and reducing workers’ ability to access them, Labour implemented “affirmative action” policies, including racial quotas to train more M?ori and

Pacific doctors, and using ethnic criteria to determine a patient’s place on a surgery waiting list.

Labour, the Greens, Te P?ti M?ori and pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organisation (ISO) also defended race-based practices such as universities creating separate study spaces for M?ori and Pacific students.

Against the ACT Party’s campaign, the opposition parties and the ISO are now advancing the slogan “Toit? te Tiriti” (honour the treaty) and presenting the Treaty of Waitangi as a progressive document that safeguards the rights of all M?ori. It is nothing of the sort.

The treaty was instrumental in bringing capitalist property relations to New Zealand and facilitating the colonisation of the country. More recently, through the Waitangi Tribunal, it has served to enrich a layer of tribal capitalists and to sow divisions among workers.

The working class must reject the divisive politics of both sides in the official “debate.” Both the racist demagoguery of the government and the identity politics of the Labour-led opposition are designed to pit workers against each other in a fight for access to diminishing public services, employment opportunities and other benefits.

The working class can only fight back against austerity and militarism if workers unite across all ethnicities and nationalities based on their common class interests, to put an end to the capitalist system, which is the source of social inequality, racism and imperialist war. This means taking up the struggle for socialist internationalism, by joining and fighting to build the Socialist Equality Group.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)