

New Zealand opposition parties seek to contain mass protests against racist Treaty Principles Bill

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The New Zealand coalition government's Treaty Principles Bill, aimed at sowing divisions between indigenous Māori and non-Māori, has sparked widespread public opposition.

On November 19, around 50,000 people rallied in Wellington outside parliament and in surrounding streets, chanting "Kill the Bill." It was the culmination of a series of marches in towns and cities across the country, joined by tens of thousands more people.

The proposed law, put forward by the far-right ACT Party, would narrowly reinterpret the Treaty of Waitangi—signed by representatives of the British Crown and hundreds of Māori chiefs in 1840—as a document that made everyone "equal before the law" and gave the government the "full power to govern."

ACT has made inflammatory claims that the interpretation of the treaty by successive governments since the 1980s as a "partnership" between Māori and Europeans has given each race different rights, falsely implying that Māori are somehow privileged. In fact, most Māori are among the poorest and most exploited layers of the working class.

Masses of people correctly view the bill as a racist dog whistle, which scapegoats Māori in order to divert attention from the worsening social crisis affecting the entire working class. The country is mired in a recession that is more severe than the 2008 global financial crisis, with regular announcements of mass redundancies and the closure of small businesses and factories. The National Party-led coalition is inflicting deep funding cuts to healthcare, education and welfare services.

An appalling social crisis is unfolding. A government health survey released on November 19 revealed that in 2023/24, 27 percent of children "lived in households where food ran out often or sometimes," up from 21.3 percent the previous year. The level of food insecurity was significantly higher for Māori children (34.3 percent) and Pacific Island children (54.8 percent).

There is profound opposition to the ongoing oppression of Māori, who are over-represented in all statistics related to poverty, and broad recognition that attacks on Māori are bound up with attacks on the rights and living standards of the whole working population.

The ACT Party's demagoguery about wanting "equal rights for all" is a transparent fraud. ACT leader David Seymour openly defends the historic levels of social inequality. The party, which received just 8.6 percent of the votes in the 2023 election, is funded by billionaires—including New Zealand's richest man, investor Graeme Hart, and Nick Mowbray, founder of toy company Zuru—and calls for the privatisation of public services, the evisceration of whatever regulations still exist to protect workers and ultra-low taxes for the rich.

The other two coalition partners—the National and New Zealand First Parties—have declared that they will oppose ACT's bill at its next reading. The parties voted for the bill to pass its first reading, however, allowing it

to dominate political discussion for several more months during a select committee process.

The protests against the Treaty Principles Bill brought together a diverse cross-section of society, predominantly Māori but also many Pacific Islanders, Europeans and Asians, workers and middle class people. The turnout reflected anger towards all the government's reactionary policies, including its brutal cuts to health and education and its support for the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Politically, however, the protests have been dominated by the opposition parties—the Māori nationalist Te Pahi Māori, the Greens and the Labour Party—which have no real differences with the government's agenda of austerity and militarism. They are working together with the trade union bureaucracy and pseudo-left groups to suppress opposition to job losses and prevent the development of a conscious working class movement against capitalism.

The opposition parties have promoted the slogan Toitū Te Tiriti (honour the treaty), which has been widely adopted. This slogan reflects the widespread illusion that the Treaty of Waitangi provides the means to defend Māori and alleviate inequality and poverty.

The protest organisers have promoted an online petition titled "Stop the Treaty Principles Bill—Toitū Te Tiriti," signed by more than 280,000 people. For Māori, the petition says, the Bill "represents a direct assault on our rights, our culture, and our identity. It threatens to perpetuate the injustices of the past, widening the gap of inequality that still persists in our society today and taking this into our future."

The petition accuses the government of seeking "to diminish the unique place of Māori in relation to the Treaty, by trampling on its mana [prestige]." It hails the treaty as "a great beacon of light and hope for both parties [the Crown and Māori] that allowed the establishment of a government that acknowledged Māori chiefs having rangatiratanga [chieftainship] over their lands and ensured all peoples in this country would be treated the same."

This statement reflects the nationalist mythology surrounding the treaty, which successive National and Labour Party-led governments have promoted for decades. The petition's description of the treaty's purpose and outcome bears no relation to what actually occurred in 1840 and afterwards. The fact is that the treaty does not offer any progressive way forward for workers, Māori or non-Māori.

The Treaty of Waitangi stated that Māori would retain ownership of their lands and possessions and have the same rights as British citizens, in exchange for allowing Britain to establish a colonial government and buy Māori land.

Significant differences existed between the English version of the treaty and the Māori version that the chiefs signed, underscoring the Crown's duplicity. In the English document, Māori gave up their "sovereignty,"

but in the M?ori translation, they allowed the British to establish “kawanatanga” or “governorship,” a more ambiguous concept.

The British soon reneged on the treaty and amassed an army to take the land in a series of brutal wars which, along with imported diseases, decimated the M?ori population.

In recent decades, however, governments have promoted the treaty as the guarantor of harmonious race relations. The Waitangi Tribunal was established in 1975 to investigate alleged breaches of the treaty. Since the 1980s, successive governments have paid hundreds of millions of dollars in “treaty settlements” to several M?ori tribes, turning them into lucrative businesses with interests in fisheries, property development, forestry, tourism and other industries.

The settlements did not benefit M?ori workers, who were disproportionately impacted by mass redundancies and the shutdown of factories during the 1980s and 1990s. Today, M?ori have persistently higher rates of poverty, worse housing conditions and lower life expectancy than European New Zealanders.

Te P?ti M?ori (TPM), which represents the tribal capitalists in parliament, regularly glorifies the treaty and, in doing so, downplays the brutal history of colonisation. “This country was not settled by conquest, it was settled by consent,” the party’s co-leader Rawiri Waititi told parliament in July.

All the parliamentary parties have made similar statements, including ACT leader David Seymour, who declared on November 14: “We are fortunate that our country was founded by a voluntary agreement giving... equal rights to all.”

Waititi’s position is echoed by the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation (ISO), which supported the Greens and TPM in last year’s election in the hopes of returning a Labour-led coalition government. The ISO wrote on November 11: “New Zealand was not founded by conquest. It was founded by treaty. And despite having never been honoured, the mere existence of that treaty as a potential obstacle to profit haunts the capitalist class.”

This is a blatant falsification of history. The land wars, which the ISO’s statement does not mention, began in 1845 and raged for almost three decades. The tribes put up heroic resistance, but were eventually outgunned and outnumbered by the British. About one million hectares was taken from the defeated tribes. Various forms of legal trickery and outright theft were used to conquer the vast majority of the country. What was this if not violent conquest?

The ISO has adapted itself to nationalist propaganda which asserts that the colonisation of New Zealand was exceptionally fair because of the treaty. The contrast is sometimes made with Australia, where genocidal methods were used against the Indigenous people. Such measures could not be used in New Zealand, not because the colonial regime was more enlightened or humanitarian, but because the M?ori tribes possessed significant armed forces. To establish colonial domination, the tribes had to be divided and duped, as well as subdued with military force.

The colonisation of New Zealand was not achieved by “consent” any more than the colonisation of India, North America and Africa, where brutal military campaigns and massacres were accompanied by dozens of lying treaties aimed at dividing the native population and facilitating territorial acquisitions. The Sri Lankan Trotskyists N.M. Perera and Philip Gunawardene summed up this history in 1944: “The British Empire was built up by perjury by day and forgery by night.”

The claim that the Treaty of Waitangi is “a potential obstacle to profit” is false. In the nineteenth century the treaty entrenched capitalist relations by allowing the Crown to buy M?ori land, which had not been considered private property in the capitalist sense before the arrival of Europeans.

Since the 1980s the treaty settlements have created a layer of M?ori capitalists. The tribes controlled an estimated \$11.8 billion in assets in 2023, while the M?ori economy is worth \$70 billion and is growing faster

than the overall economy. To defend these material interests, M?ori politicians and ex-radicals, who prior to the 1980s denounced the Treaty of Waitangi as a fraud, now vehemently defend it as a sacred document.

The ISO represents sections of the middle class that see this accumulation of wealth as a positive development and defend it based on racial identity politics. From 2011 to 2014, along with the pseudo-left groups Fightback and Socialist Aotearoa, the ISO joined the M?ori nationalist Mana Party. The Mana Party, a splinter from Te P?ti M?ori, called for larger treaty settlements and more political power for the tribes.

Mana fell apart in 2017 after its leader Hone Harawira, who had been glorified for years by the pseudo-lefts, made racist statements demanding the death penalty for “Chinese drug smugglers.” Harawira remains politically active in support of TPM and played a role in organising the protests against the Treaty Principles Bill.

TPM is a right-wing capitalist party; it collaborated with the 2008–2017 National Party-led government, supporting its policies of charter schools and the privatisation of welfare services to benefit the tribes, as well as an increase in the goods and services tax and other austerity measures in response to the 2008 economic crisis. TPM now calls for the state to be restructured with a separate M?ori parliament and separate public services delivered “by M?ori, for M?ori.”

The conflict in the political establishment over the Treaty Principles Bill reflects differences within the ruling class over how much power should be given to the tribes. The last Labour Party government began implementing “co-governance” measures to more closely incorporate the tribal elite into decision-making about the use of water and other resources. Some of these measures are being wound back by the current government, at the behest of rival business interests.

At the same time, the “debate” over the treaty is being used as a diversion from the plummeting living standards and decaying social services that affect all sections of the working class, M?ori and non-M?ori alike.

Workers and young people who want to fight the government’s attacks on workers of all backgrounds, as well as the militarisation of the country for war, can only do so in opposition to all factions of the capitalist class, including the M?ori nationalists. Workers should reject ACT’s racially divisive legislation as well as the glorification of the Treaty of Waitangi, which also serves to divide the working class and uphold capitalism.

The way forward is not to be found in colonial treaties, or in racial identity politics, but in the unification of workers of all countries in the struggle to abolish the capitalist system and to establish a socialist society, which will put an end to all forms of inequality, oppression and war.



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