

New Zealand government installs new far-right health minister

Tom Peters
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In a sign of deepening crisis in the New Zealand government, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon last week announced a cabinet reshuffle, removing Dr Shane Reti as health minister and replacing him with Simeon Brown, who is on the far-right of the National Party.

Only last month, Luxon told the *Stuff* website that he had confidence in Reti, who he said was “doing a really difficult job well.” The PM gave no explanation for his sudden about-face on January 19, only saying that Reti had performed well, “but I have also heard Kiwis’ concerns that they expect to see even more progress—ensuring they can access the care they need, when they need it.”

As well as being an experienced medical practitioner, Reti was the most senior Māori politician in the National Party and was the party’s deputy leader during 2021. As health minister, he was tasked with overseeing the government’s brutal austerity agenda, which has triggered widespread anger in the working class.

Far from improving access to healthcare, the government has imposed an unofficial hiring and wage freeze across the country’s run-down, crisis-ridden public hospitals. Health NZ commissioner Lester Levy is seeking to slash \$2 billion from the health budget this financial year, at the expense of staff and patient care.

Last September, about 40,000 people protested in Dunedin against the decision to significantly scale back a promised redevelopment of the city’s hospital, which provides services to hundreds of thousands of people in the South Island.

Significantly, Reti was sacked in the midst of a still unresolved pay dispute involving more than 30,000 nurses and healthcare assistants, who held part-day strikes in December. The workers overwhelmingly

rejected a proposed pay rise of just 1.5 percent over two years—a major pay cut relative to the cost of living.

Reti remained largely silent on the dispute, merely saying he was “disappointed” with the strike action and called for negotiations.

Evidently, the government has decided that Reti, even though he is a right-wing bourgeois figure, does not have what it takes to lead the next phase of austerity measures, which are designed to eviscerate the health system and prepare large chunks of it for privatisation.

The installation of Brown, as columnist Gordon Campbell put it, “is a signal that the gloves are coming off in this crucial portfolio.” In his previous role as transport minister over the past year Brown has overseen cuts to walking, cycling and public transport.

Brown, 33, has no background in health. He is a Baptist Christian who prior to entering parliament was best-known as the president of the Auckland University anti-abortion student group ProLife. He was also a vocal opponent of same-sex marriage legislation in 2013.

In May 2020, Brown railed against public health measures to stop the spread of COVID-19, including temporary shutdowns of businesses and schools, restrictions on in-person church gatherings and self-isolation rules. Brown told parliament that these provisions were “extreme” and an “abhorrent” attack on “the freedom of worship.” Such measures saved thousands of lives in the first two years of the pandemic, before they were scrapped by the then Labour government.

Speaking to Radio NZ on January 20, Brown said he was focused on targets including reduced waiting times in emergency departments, for elective surgeries, and for general practitioner appointments. He did not explain how this was compatible with the

government's cutbacks, merely repeating that "an extra \$16 billion" was being added over three years on the health budget. He said the Dunedin Hospital redevelopment would proceed but was going through a "re-scoping exercise," refusing to say what the scale of the new hospital would be.

While the government constantly claims it is investing "record" sums in healthcare, it is well below what is required to meet inflation and costs associated with the aging population—and the increased burden of chronic illnesses—including the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and tens of thousands of Long COVID cases.

In New Zealand as in every country, the ruling class is carrying out an assault on public health, which is viewed as an unacceptable drain on the obscene wealth of the super-rich. Brown's elevation coincides with the inauguration of US President Donald Trump, who has chosen Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the notorious purveyor of pseudoscience and anti-vaccine disinformation, to head the Department of Health and Human Services.

The Luxon government—a coalition of National and the far-right ACT and New Zealand First parties—is widely despised, but there is disaffection and anger with the entire political establishment. A Taxpayers' Union-Curia poll this month found that National's support had dropped to 29.6 percent, falling below the opposition Labour Party, which is only at 30.9 percent.

Labour's leader Chris Hipkins told RNZ that Brown had "no experience in delivering anything" and no understanding of healthcare. The Labour Party, however, has no fundamental differences with the government's cutbacks. The healthcare system was already in a deep crisis when Labour was in power before the 2023 election, with hospitals frequently over capacity, and tens of thousands of surgeries delayed for months on end—a situation made worse by the removal of all restrictions on the spread of COVID.

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) issued a statement calling on Brown to "address chronic staffing shortages" by increasing nurses' pay and to end the recruitment freeze—steps the union knows the government will not take. The union bureaucracy is playing the key role in preventing any unified fight against the government's policies. The NZNO limited nurses' strike action last month to two eight-hour and four-hour stoppages, and since then has remained completely silent on its negotiations with

Health NZ.

There has been no attempt to mobilize broader layers of workers in the health system, education, and the wider public and private sectors, to oppose the driving down of all workers' wages and conditions. Instead, unions such as the Public Service Association have agreed to thousands of orderly redundancies, helping to drive up unemployment.

The working class must recognise both the ruthlessness of the government and the role of Labour, its allies and the unions in deflecting opposition and enforcing its historic attacks. The only way forward is through the fight for the political independence of the working class, based on a socialist program in opposition to all the parliamentary parties, and for the building of new rank-and-file committees in hospitals and other workplaces to break the stranglehold of the union apparatus and organise a real struggle against austerity and to defend public health and other vital services.



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