

New Zealand deputy PM rails against “Marxists” and declares “war on woke”

John Braddock, Tom Peters
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Winston Peters, New Zealand’s deputy prime minister and leader of the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, delivered a Trumpian “state of the nation” speech in Christchurch on March 23. Peters’ statements are an indication of the increasing lurch to the far-right by the entire political establishment, as the economic crisis deepens and as New Zealand is integrated more closely into US imperialism’s war plans.

Peters, who is also the foreign minister, addressed approximately 750 party members and supporters a few days after his return from the United States, where he met with Trump officials, including US Secretary of State Marco Rubio. The discussions were aimed at strengthening New Zealand’s alliance with the US, which is preparing for war against China and unleashing war throughout the Middle East.

The NZ First event was targeted by pro-Palestine protesters. Peters’ speech was disrupted on multiple occasions by protesters in the audience, all of whom were quickly removed by security officials. Around 10 people were ejected while Peters shouted for them to be thrown out, in the style of Donald Trump at his election rallies.

The government has refused to condemn the resumption of Israel’s genocidal bombing and starvation of Gaza. Peters has previously indicated that he is amenable to any US-dictated plan for seizing and “reconstructing” Gaza.

Peters’ speech, in its content, language and delivery, channeled Trump-style far-right politics. Against a backdrop of New Zealand flags, Peters declared NZ First to be a “true nationalist party” and raised the slogan: “Make New Zealand First Again,” with the rallying cry: “Together we are going to take back our country.” His address was pitched as preparing the ground for the next election, which is not due until October next year.

In a semi-coherent tirade, Peters lambasted protesters as “left-wing fascists,” “communist, fascist and anti-democratic losers” and “Marxist whingers.”

This echoed similar statements made in January by David Seymour, leader of the ACT Party in the coalition government, warning about the “danger” of “Marxism” and “the hard left,” which he said was appealing to young people hit by soaring living costs.

Such comments reflect growing fears in ruling circles about the shift to the left among workers and young people, in response to soaring social inequality, austerity, genocide and war. The 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer, a recent global survey, found that only

19 percent of New Zealanders believe the next generation will be better off compared to today, while 68 percent agree that “the wealthy don’t pay their fair share of taxes.”

NZ First and ACT are seeking to steer popular anger in the most reactionary direction possible. They are attempting to stoke racial animosity towards indigenous Māori, bigotry towards transgender people, anti-immigrant chauvinism, and anti-science quackery.

The two right-wing parties received just 6 percent and 8 percent in the 2023 election and are extremely unpopular, but are largely setting the agenda of the coalition government nominally led by the conservative National Party.

Peters promised to carry out a “war on woke”—a term which the far-right uses to refer to everything from identity politics and affirmative action programs, to education about the brutal history of colonisation, protections against discrimination, environmental regulations, science-based public health policies, and other constraints on corporate profit.

Peters trumpeted NZ First’s bill to remove targets related to “diversity, equity and inclusion” (DEI) from the public service, saying that “all public service hiring [should] be based on merit, skill, and competence.”

The implication that people have been given jobs based on race, not merit, is intended to inflame racial divisions and to justify the government’s assault on public sector jobs. It goes hand-in-hand with ACT and NZ First’s false claims that Māori have been given a “privileged” status due to policies and handouts linked to the Treaty of Waitangi—which have in fact benefited only a narrow, wealthy layer.

Like the Trump administration, the NZ government is exploiting widespread hostility to divisive identity politics—heavily promoted by the opposition Labour Party, the Greens, Te Pāti Māori and their supporters—which blames white people and men for the deeply entrenched social inequality caused by capitalism.

While Peters conflated DEI with “cultural Marxism,” identity politics has nothing to do with socialism. It is a form of middle class politics, which serves to divide the working class while funnelling wealth and resources to a small number of entrepreneurs, public servants, academics and others, based on gender and race.

The media and political establishment’s promotion of identity politics as “left wing” has enabled the far-right parties to hypocritically posture as the champions of “equal rights”—even as the government accelerates the assault on living standards and

public services, embraces the fascist Trump, and seeks to demonise anti-genocide protesters.

In his Christchurch speech, Peters viciously attacked transgender people, declaring that NZ First would stop them from participating in women's sport and using women's bathrooms. The far-right crowd cheered when Peters said the party had been instrumental in removing gender and sex education guidelines in schools.

The deputy prime minister also called for "a re-evaluation" of New Zealand's commitments under the 2016 Paris climate accord and dismissed efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as an "idealistic flight of futility." The government, with NZ First playing a critical role, is pushing to expand mining for fossil fuels, including in national parks.

In an appeal to anti-science quackery, Peters denounced the requirement for councils to fluoridate drinking water. In words that bring to mind the mad general Jack Ripper in the film *Dr. Strangelove*, Peters called mandatory fluoridation "a despotic Soviet-era disgrace." Water fluoridation is a basic public health policy which, according to the Ministry of Health, "is estimated to lead to 40 percent lower lifetime incidence of tooth decay among children and adolescents."

NZ First and ACT have also attacked the public health measures used early in the COVID-19 pandemic, including temporary lockdowns and vaccine mandates, and are seeking to ensure that such life-saving measures are never used again.

Much of Peters' "state of the nation" speech was devoted to attacking the opposition Labour Party, which led the government from 2017–2023. Labour, he said, did not represent working people—which is undeniably true, but it is equally true of NZ First and all the parliamentary parties, which represent different sections of big business.

Peters blamed Labour for the recession earlier this year, claiming that it had lied about the state of the economy and had mismanaged the country's finances. In fact, the recession was deliberately triggered by the austerity measures and monetary policies supported by the entire parliamentary establishment.

After Jacinda Ardern's Labour government bailed out the rich during the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ruling elite took steps to force the working class to pay the bill, through deep cuts to public services including health and education. These measures, combined with soaring living costs, led to Labour's devastating loss in the 2023 election, in which it gained only 25 percent of the votes.

A year and a half later, Peters acknowledged that conditions facing workers were still "tough," but claimed that "there is real hope on the horizon." In fact, the National-led coalition is exacerbating the social crisis with further attacks on healthcare, a reduction in the minimum wage and welfare benefits, smaller and less nutritious school lunches, and mass job cuts and frozen wages across the public sector.

Peters' attempt to posture as the representative of ordinary workers—he declared that "some of us know what poverty tastes, feels and smells like"—is utterly absurd. The 79-year-old politician is a fixture of the establishment. He founded NZ First in 1993 in a split from the National Party and built his political career on populist nationalist dog whistling and anti-immigrant bigotry.

While NZ First has always been deeply unpopular, it receives financial support from some of the country's wealthiest individuals, including billionaire investor Graeme Hart, real estate mogul John Bayley, fishing magnate Peter Talley, and various property development and horse racing interests.

NZ First has also been embraced by both the major parties and sections of the trade union bureaucracy. The party played a major role in the Labour-led coalition government from 2017 to 2020, which also included the Greens.

After the inconclusive 2017 election, Peters played a crucial role in bringing Labour into power, with the overt support of Washington. Then US ambassador Scott Brown made extraordinary public statements signalling the outgoing National Party-led government was too soft on China, and supporting a NZ First-Labour coalition government.

Ardern then gave NZ First significant power, making Peters the deputy prime minister and foreign minister—the same position he has today under the National-led government. Labour also adopted NZ First's anti-immigrant policies, to shift the blame for the housing crisis, low wages and unemployment onto vulnerable migrants.

The elevation of NZ First and ACT must serve as a warning to working people. The extreme right-wing agenda represented by Trump is not a uniquely American phenomenon. In response to the breakdown of capitalism the ruling class in every country, including New Zealand, is embracing the most toxic forms of nationalism, bigotry and racism. The government is seeking to demonise opposition, especially from the socialist left, as it carries out social counter-revolution at home and prepares for imperialist war abroad.

There is no shortage of anger and hostility towards the government, but the great danger is that the working class is not politically prepared for the struggles it now confronts. To provide the necessary socialist program and leadership, workers and youth must take up the fight to build a genuine socialist and internationalist party, in opposition to Labour and its allies, including the union bureaucracy, which has suppressed any organised action against war and austerity. The urgent task is to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, in New Zealand.



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