

New Zealand media proposes compulsory military training

Tom Peters
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On April 25, the *New Zealand Herald* marked Anzac Day—the annual militarist holiday that celebrates the country’s participation in World War I—by publishing an article by right-wing commentator Matthew Hooton calling for the reintroduction of compulsory military training (CMT) for young people.

Pointing to the far-right government’s recent commitment to double military spending from 1 to 2 percent of gross domestic product, Hooton said New Zealand’s allies—Australia, the US and the NATO imperialist powers—would expect it to be raised to 3 percent of GDP. This will be paid for with even deeper cuts to hospitals, public education and other essential services that workers rely on.

“If New Zealand really plans to spend billions more on defence, why not invest it in universal military training,” Hooton declared. He said this would teach young people “critical skills” and allow the country to “better respond to humanitarian crises in the Pacific” and take part in “peacekeeping” operations around the world. It would also “help with nation-building and social cohesion in an age of social-media addiction and political polarisation.”

Hooton’s call for conscription was echoed by talkback radio hosts on Newstalk ZB, who presented it as a means to address unemployment and help “directionless” young people. At the end of last year, with the country in recession and corporations slashing jobs, 13.2 percent of under-25-year-olds were not in employment, education or training.

All of this is a smokescreen. The real purpose of CMT, as with the record increase in military spending, is to prepare for imperialist war to redivide the world. The ruling class is seeking to instil young people with nationalism and unquestioning obedience to authority, so they can be used as cannon fodder.

Governments in the US and across Europe, which are pumping trillions of dollars into the war against Russia over Ukraine and Israel’s genocide in Gaza, are also actively discussing how to bring back the draft.

As a minor imperialist power, New Zealand is a member of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance and has sent military personnel to Britain to help train Ukrainian conscripts, and to the Middle East to assist in the US bombing of Yemen.

New Zealand is also integrated into the far-advanced US war plans targeting China, which are accelerating alongside the Trump administration’s devastating trade warfare. The government’s recent Defence Capability Plan made clear that the increased military spending is aimed against China.

Some form of CMT existed for young men during most of the 20th century in New Zealand. It played a major role in the militarisation of society in the lead-up to the First World War, in which about 100,000 New Zealanders served in the armed forces, almost one tenth of the population at the time. More than 16,600 were killed and 41,317 wounded.

Prime Minister Christopher Luxon recently glorified New Zealand’s participation in the disastrous 1915 British invasion of Gallipoli in WWI, telling a media conference on May 4 that the troops went “to fight for the Kiwi way of life that we all enjoy today.” In fact, New Zealand’s ruling class joined the war to defend the British Empire and to seize more colonies in the Pacific.

CMT was abolished with the repeal of the Military Service Act in 1973. This followed mass protests against New Zealand’s involvement in the US imperialist war in Vietnam.

Now, with an even more catastrophic war being prepared involving nuclear-armed powers, the ruling

class is seeking to overcome deeply ingrained opposition to war and militarism in the population.

This is the purpose of Hooton's column and the broader media propaganda campaign, which was likely coordinated with the government. Hooton is well-connected, having been employed as an advisor to the conservative National Party and the far-right ACT Party, which are both in the coalition government.

A frothing militarist, Hooton regularly paints China as a threat to New Zealand's interests. He recently suggested that special forces be deployed to invade the Cook Islands and overturn its government's economic agreements with China.

Hooton is also one of New Zealand's most vehement supporters of the Zionist regime in Israel and has repeatedly smeared opponents of the Gaza genocide as antisemitic supporters of terrorism.

When the *New Zealand Herald* boosted Hooton's call for conscription on Facebook, the response was divided. While many supporters of the government and the military commented in favour of the idea, Hooton was angrily denounced by hundreds of people.

Terri wrote: "Absolutely not. We [are] not making human shields for [Prime Minister] Luxon's mates."

Toni similarly said: "Heck no, we don't need to be sending our youth off to fight billionaires wars." Merania called the idea "stupid," adding that "war only feeds the rich."

Ed commented: "We are on the brink of ww3. That's why they want to start training up the kiddos again not for any other bs reason."

Some pointed to the hypocrisy of the government and its supporters claiming to care about young people while imposing brutal austerity measures, including cuts to school and university funding.

Buster asked: "Why should we lay down our lives for our crappiest government ever, who only want to take from the people?" Ivy wrote: "What has this country done [for] us besides causing us stress from the high cost of living and lack of jobs. Not worth fighting for."

Karen stated: "No way am I going to let my sons become cannon fodder for fascist, illegal conflicts overseas sent by gutless, self serving, corrupt politicians. NO WAY."

These anti-war sentiments are widely shared, as seen at the protests against the Gaza genocide. One survey last year found that 68 percent of New Zealand

respondents opposed greater spending on the armed forces, while only 28 percent said it should increase.

Yet this sentiment finds no expression in the capitalist political establishment. The opposition Labour Party fully supports the government's military build-up. The last Labour-led government, which included the Green Party, strengthened New Zealand's alliance with the US. Previous Labour governments have also sent troops to support the illegal and barbaric US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The only way to stop the world from descending into barbarism is through revolutionary struggle to abolish the capitalist system. The urgent task is to build socialist parties, in New Zealand and in all countries, as part of the world Trotskyist movement, to provide political leadership for the fight against war, fascism and mass poverty.

This was the central message of the International May Day Online Rally hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site* last weekend, which featured speakers from the Socialist Equality Parties around the world and the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) in New Zealand. We urge those who agree with this perspective to contact the SEG today.



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