

New Zealand government defends social inequality on Waitangi Day

Tom Peters
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Waitangi Day on February 6, New Zealand's national day, commemorates the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 by representatives of the British Empire and several Māori tribal leaders.

The document facilitated British colonisation and the entrenchment of capitalist property relations. It falsely promised that Māori rights to land and resources would be protected, in exchange for the indigenous people accepting a colonial government. The treaty served to buy time for the British to amass sufficient military forces to conquer Māori land in a series of brutal wars, which killed thousands of people.

Speaking at the Waitangi Treaty Grounds each year, political leaders invariably gloss over these facts. Instead, they present a nationalist mythology, according to which the treaty was a national founding document that paved the way for democracy and an end to racism and discrimination.

In a speech on February 5, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon claimed that in contrast with the rest of the world, “where difference so often leads to violence and fracture, New Zealanders have decades of experience working through our differences with words, ideas and debate... and I think we have the treaty to thank for that.”

While decrying violence, however, Luxon hailed “the sacrifice of Māori in service of the Crown” during the First and Second World Wars. He repeated the phrase of Āpirana Ngata—a Māori politician who played a major role in the recruitment of young Māori for both wars—that fighting was “the price of citizenship.”

The National Party-led government, with Labour's support, intends to vastly expand the size of the military, as it integrates the country into US-led plans for war against China. Thousands of young people will be expected to again sacrifice their lives as New Zealand imperialism joins in the violent redivision of the world.

Luxon claimed that the coalition government was honouring the treaty by promoting “equality of opportunity... by improving education and health, expanding the opportunity to work, and increasing access to

entrepreneurship.”

He added, however, that the treaty “cannot and should not guarantee equality of outcomes—because that is socialism.” In other words, workers have no right to a good standard of living because that is incompatible with the capitalist system.

Social inequality has increased dramatically in recent years under successive Labour and National Party governments, which have boosted the fortunes of the super-rich at the expense of the working class.

Far from expanding job opportunities, the government has sacked thousands of public sector workers. It has also cut funding for public health and education, exacerbating the crisis in these sectors, including drastically understaffed and overwhelmed public hospitals. With the assistance of the union bureaucracy, the government is seeking to slash pay for teachers, doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers, as well as firefighters.

The day before Luxon's speech, Statistics NZ reported that unemployment reached 5.4 percent in the December quarter, the highest rate in 10 years. A total of 165,000 people are officially unemployed, 43,000 more than in December 2023.

Annual wage growth is just 2 percent, well below the inflation rate of 3.1 percent, meaning most workers, employed or not, are getting poorer.

The vast majority of Māori, who make up about 15 percent of the population, are among the most exploited workers: Māori unemployment is 11.2 percent, more than twice the national rate, while for Pacific Islanders it is 12.3 percent.

Māori and Pacific Islanders face worse health outcomes, lower life expectancy and higher levels of child poverty. Luxon trumpeted improved literacy scores for Māori school students, claiming that thousands more were “getting the start in life to create the future they dream of and ultimately deserve.” He did not mention that about 1 in 4.5 Māori children and 1 in 3.5 Pacific children are in “material hardship,” according to figures from 2023.

Both groups are also more likely to be homeless.

According to the 2023 Census, 3.94 percent of Māori and 6.6 percent of Pacific peoples are “severely housing deprived,” i.e. homeless or in unsafe, overcrowded or makeshift accommodation, compared with 2.3 percent of the overall population.

In a pitch to the tribal elite, Luxon said he was “deeply, deeply committed” to ongoing Treaty of Waitangi settlements. These are multi-million dollar payouts given to tribes, ostensibly as reparations for land confiscation and other crimes of British imperialism.

Since the 1990s, treaty settlements have been used to turn the tribes into lucrative businesses with interests in fisheries, forestry, farming, tourism, property development, and the delivery of privatised social services. This has created a wealthy layer of tribal capitalists while doing nothing to benefit ordinary Māori workers.

While Luxon used his Waitangi speech to denounce socialism and equality, Deputy Prime Minister David Seymour, from the far-right ACT Party, provocatively stated that poor and homeless people are actually well-off.

He told a media conference that thanks to British colonisation enabled by the treaty, New Zealand became “one of the most successful societies that has ever existed.” Channelling the contemptuous comments of Marie Antoinette, Seymour declared: “Even the poorest people in New Zealand today are living like kings and queens compared with most places and most times in history.”

Pressed on whether homeless people would agree, Seymour doubled down, saying homeless people had “access to better accommodation than many people did in the Middle Ages, for example.”

Such statements reflect a ruling class that regards the vast majority of the population with contempt and hatred, and is using fascistic rhetoric to justify attacks on the most vulnerable people in society. Cuts to housing programs have caused the number of people living on the streets of Auckland to double in just one year. The government is now planning to give police the power to issue “move on” orders to drive them out of the city centre.

The ACT Party has played a key role over the past two years in seeking to divert anger over social inequality by stoking racial divisions, including through its Treaty Principles Bill—which falsely claimed that all Māori have received special rights and privileges because of how governments have interpreted the treaty since the 1980s. Tens of thousands of people protested against the bill, which was voted down last year by every other party.

Labour leader Chris Hipkins declared that Seymour’s comments on homelessness were “incredibly ignorant.” He also told the media that the latest unemployment numbers were “a further indictment” on the government, which “said

they were going to fix the economy, they’ve clearly made things worse.” None of the opposition parties, however, offer any real alternative to austerity and militarism.

Labour’s senior Māori MP Willie Jackson told the media that the 2017-2023 Labour-led government “did more for Māori over that six years than any government probably has done in the previous generation.” In fact, the last government—which included both the Greens and, in its first three years, the right-wing NZ First Party—oversaw an increase in child poverty, a worsening housing crisis and the healthcare crisis. Labour lost the 2023 election in a landslide after the working class turned against it.

Te Pāti Māori (the Māori Party), which hopes to join a future Labour government, has descended into bitter factional infighting between rival representatives of the indigenous bourgeoisie. MP Mariameno Kapa-Kingi is currently in court challenging her expulsion from the party for alleged misuse of funds.

In an indication of the shift to the right by the entire political establishment, all three opposition parties have recently said they could work in a future coalition government with the nationalist NZ First, which plays a major role in the current government.

NZ First, along with ACT, has sought to inflame prejudice and division by falsely claiming that Māori have received privileges thanks to identity politics and affirmative action programs—which have actually benefited only a narrow, wealthy layer. NZ First is also viciously scapegoating immigrants for increased unemployment and inequality.

The glorification of the Treaty of Waitangi by both the government and its parliamentary opponents serves to obscure the fundamental class divisions within New Zealand society. The only way forward for working people—Māori and non-Māori—is to break from all factions of the ruling elite, reject all forms of politics based on race and nationalism, and build a socialist movement that fights for the reorganisation of society to meet human need, not private profit.



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