

New Zealand government introduces anti-transgender legislation

Tom Peters
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A bill to define the words “man” and “woman” in law passed its first reading in New Zealand’s parliament on May 20. The proposal, introduced by the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party and supported by the conservative National Party and the far-right ACT Party, is intended to create a legal basis for stepped up discrimination against transgender people.

The “Legislation (Definitions of Woman and Man) Amendment Bill,” drafted by NZ First MP Jenny Marcroft, calls for “defining ‘woman’ as ‘an adult human biological female’ and ‘man’ as ‘an adult human biological male’” across all legislation. The bill’s undisguised aim is to stigmatise anyone who identifies as a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth based upon their outward biological traits—including people who undergo medical procedures to transition from one gender to another.

The three-party coalition government, with NZ First leading the charge, is emulating the Trump administration and far-right parties in Britain and elsewhere, which are seeking to whip up fear and hatred towards transgender people and to undermine their basic rights.

Like NZ First’s efforts to demonise and scapegoat immigrants, the anti-trans crusade is a desperate attempt to divert attention from the government’s deepening assault on the working class. It is no accident that Marcroft’s bill was introduced one week before the May 28 budget, which will cut thousands of jobs in the public service, slash welfare payments, and dramatically increase university student fees.

With an election looming in November, mass opposition is developing to the attacks on healthcare, education and welfare services, which are paying for tax cuts for the rich and boosting the military to join US-led imperialist wars. The government is desperately seeking to change the subject and to channel social discontent and anger in the most reactionary direction.

Among the main proponents of the law change is Family First, which organised a petition in 2024 to demand a law stating that “a ‘female’ means an individual whose biological reproductive system is developed to produce

ova.” Family First is a far-right Christian lobby group with a long record of campaigning against abortion rights, same-sex marriage and sex education and for the censorship of books and films.

The impact of NZ First’s bill on transgender people will be far-reaching. Speaking to Radio NZ on April 23, NZ First leader and foreign minister Winston Peters said it would “replace” an existing law passed in 2021 which made it easier for transgender, non-binary and intersex people to alter the gender recorded on their birth certificates.

One of the models for the new law is US President Trump’s January 20, 2025 executive order which defined “men” and “women” based on the biological chromosomes they possess “at conception.” This has been followed by a barrage of anti-transgender legislation, including an end to federal funding for gender-affirming healthcare. The administration has sought to ban transgender athletes from participating in women’s sports and criminalize the provision of gender-affirming care for adolescents.

On May 20 the US House of Representatives passed the “Stopping Indoctrination and Protecting Kids Act,” which will prevent federally-funded schools from teaching about transgender people.

The MAGA Republicans’ rhetoric and legislative offensive has fueled attacks on transgender people. The GLAAD Anti-LGBTQ Extremism Reporting Tracker documented 485 incidents of harassment, vandalism and violence targeting transgender people in the US in 2024/25—including one fatal incident—up 14 percent on the previous year.

The New Zealand government has already taken regressive steps. Last year it “paused” the ability of doctors to prescribe puberty blockers for transgender youth—an important part of gender-affirming care. Primary and secondary school curricula are being rewritten after NZ First demanded the removal of “gender ideology” from sex and relationships education guidelines.

The far-right’s campaign in NZ has also had consequences. A survey by the University of Waikato

published last year found that almost one in five transgender and non-binary people had been threatened with violence, and 8 percent had been subjected to violent attacks. More than half had considered suicide and 10 percent had attempted it.

Now the government is portraying transgender people, a highly vulnerable group making up less than 1 percent of the population, as a threat to women and children.

In an inflammatory speech to introduce her bill, Marcroft told parliament: “What it means to be a woman is under attack.” She insinuated that allowing transgender people to use female changing and showering facilities at public swimming pools was dangerous. “Our councils are captured by ideology and don’t give a hoot about the privacy and dignity of women and girls,” she declared.

Minister for Children Karen Chhour, from the far-right ACT Party, similarly stated that the bill was about “safeguarding vulnerable women and girls” and preventing “discrimination” against them.

The bill goes against advice by the government’s own Law Commission, which delivered an extensive report last September recommending legal protections for transgender people. These included the right to use the public bathrooms and other single-sex facilities that correspond to their gender identity.

The same government that purports to care about children’s wellbeing is cutting welfare benefits for families under conditions where one in five children lives in poverty. According to Stats NZ, 71,000 children (6 percent) are experiencing “severe material hardship,” meaning they live in “households lacking 10 or more of 18 essential daily items, such as fresh fruit, adequate heating, doctor visits, or the ability to pay for an unexpected \$500 expense.”

The biggest threat to children comes from the state itself. A royal commission of inquiry found in 2024 that hundreds of thousands of children had been abused and neglected while in the care of the state and religious organisations. The systemic abuse was mostly covered up for decades under successive governments.

The government’s claim to be defending “women’s rights” is a fraud. With the assistance of the union bureaucracy, the government this year pushed through massive pay cuts for tens of thousands of teachers, nurses and other healthcare workers, most of them women. It has also blocked hundreds of thousands of workers in female-dominated industries from making “pay equity” claims to lift their wages to the level of similar male-dominated professions.

The opposition parties—Labour, the Greens and Te P?ti M?ori—voted against the “Definitions of Woman and Man” bill. Green Party co-leader Chl?e Swarbrick said it was part

of the government’s “incessant, well-funded political messaging that paints a bogeyman of migrants and trans people.”

Labour and the Greens, however, bear responsibility for the prominent role played by NZ First. The three parties formed a coalition government from 2017 to 2020, under prime minister Jacinda Ardern. Despite NZ First getting just 7.2 percent of the votes, its leader Peters was made foreign minister and deputy prime minister. Labour and the Greens collaborated with NZ First on right-wing policies including strengthening the military and NZ’s alliance with US imperialism, and restricting immigration.

Speaking to the *New Zealand Herald* on May 26, Labour leader Chris Hipkins hypocritically denounced NZ First for “attacking immigrants” and “the rainbow community.” He refused, however, to rule out forming another coalition government with NZ First after the November election.

The opposition capitalist parties and their pseudo-left allies also play into the hands of the far-right with their relentless promotion of identity politics based on race, gender and sexuality. This is the politics of the upper middle class, which views social relations as an endless war between different identity categories: white versus brown, recent migrants versus indigenous people, straight versus gay, men versus women, and so on. Based on this divisive and reactionary logic, some self-styled feminists, represented by groups like Speak Up For Women in New Zealand, have joined hands with NZ First and Family First in portraying transgender people as a threat to “what it means to be a woman.”

The most important division in society is not race, gender or national origin, but the class gulf separating the working class from the financial and corporate elite. Democratic rights can only be defended by uniting workers of every race, nationality and gender, based on their common class interests, in a movement to abolish capitalism and establish a socialist society, free from all forms of oppression and discrimination.



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