

New Zealand government exploits pandemic to boost police and military powers

By Tom Peters
7 May 2020

New Zealand's Labour Party-led government, like others throughout the world, is exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic to test anti-democratic measures, including an extension of police and military powers.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern declared a state of emergency on March 25, as the country went into a lockdown aimed at stopping the spread of the coronavirus. Most businesses and all schools were closed. The lockdown was necessary, particularly given New Zealand's lack of preparation for the pandemic, its rundown public health system, lack of quarantine facilities and inadequate testing and contact tracing.

The government eased lockdown restrictions on April 28, allowing many businesses and schools to reopen, despite opposition from thousands of teachers and warnings from scientists that a longer lockdown was needed to eliminate the virus. The state of emergency, however, has been extended.

The Ardern government's expansion of state powers goes well beyond what was needed to enforce the lockdown. Under the Civil Defence Emergency Act, the government can override virtually any legislation, with only a handful of exceptions including the Bill of Rights Act and the Electoral Act.

The government is strengthening the police, military and intelligence agencies in preparation to suppress opposition as it imposes the burdens of the greatest crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression on the working class. While businesses are receiving billions of dollars in subsidies, tens of thousands of people have already lost their jobs or suffered wage cuts. Unemployment is expected to go above 10 percent and could reach 30 percent, a level comparable to the 1930s.

Police now have the power to "direct any person to stop any activity that may cause or substantially

contribute to an emergency." Officers can enter houses without warrants to enforce social distancing and isolation. Police can also call on the military for assistance.

So far, more than 600 people have been prosecuted by police for allegedly breaching the lockdown. Thousands more have received warnings. The maximum sentence for failing to comply with self-isolation orders is six months in prison and a \$4,000 fine.

Canterbury University law professor John Hopkins wrote on *Stuff* on March 31: "There is no limit to this power unless the government provides guidance or rules as to how it should be exercised." Police have reportedly been issued with guidelines by the government's Crown Law office, but these have not been made public.

Law professor Grant Morris wrote on the Radio NZ website on March 30 that the police commissioner had been given "huge, largely unchecked, power." He compared the state of emergency to "what New Zealand experienced in World War I and II and during the 1951 Waterfront Dispute."

In those periods, extraordinary powers were used to enforce conscription, ban strikes and censor and imprison anti-war and left-wing activists. Similar laws were used in the 1930s Great Depression to suppress protests by thousands of unemployed workers.

In addition to the new police powers, Radio NZ has reported that the Ministry of Health consulted the spy agency, the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) and US company Palantir, which has worked with the CIA, about how to track contacts of people with COVID-19. The GCSB is part of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network, which carries out mass surveillance on all the world's electronic

communications.

The GCSB is providing advice to help to develop a contact-tracing, mobile phone app, similar to one announced in Australia, which is capable of significantly expanding state spying.

In another ominous development, the military has been training for urban operations. A two-day Defence Force exercise was held in the working-class area of South Auckland on April 16-17, involving Army soldiers and the Air Force. Local residents were given no details about the exercise and the Defence Force refused to answer media questions about it.

The Labour Party's middle class "left" supporters have sought to sow complacency about the expanded powers.

Writing on the trade union-funded *Daily Blog* on April 21, pro-Labour Party commentator Chris Trotter praised the exercise, saying the military was preparing to suppress "a serious outbreak of civil disorder... if necessary by the use of deadly force." Trotter declared that the state had to be ready to deal with right-wing opposition to the lockdown, like the protests organised by heavily-armed Trump supporters in the US.

The pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation (ISO) published an article on March 25 saying that any "incidents of heavy-handedness by the police or military... should be condemned. But in these extraordinary circumstances the police and military are being called on to play a social role."

The ISO article by Martin Gregory declared: "I cannot see that rightwing authoritarianism and militarism will be strengthened because state forces were roped in to help in the struggle against COVID-19."

Such statements are intended to disarm the working class, under conditions where governments have been strengthening the police and military for years. The Ardern government has recruited an extra 1,800 police officers since coming to power in 2017. It has expanded police training programs in schools. Last year, the government used the Christchurch fascist terrorist attack as a pretext to further militarise the police and give more money to the spy agencies.

The military is also being expanded and upgraded, to the tune of \$20 billion. The Defence Force's regular biennial Southern Katipo exercises are explicitly preparing to confront and suppress "insurgent"

populations.

The real reason the government is strengthening the police, military and spy agencies has nothing to do with protecting public health, let alone combating fascism. (In New Zealand, as in the US, fascists support the military and have joined it.)

In Spain, police have been mobilised to force workers back to work while the pandemic is still out of control. In Australia, police have used emergency powers to ban protests by refugees.

The NZ ruling elite is anticipating a renewed upsurge of working class struggle. In 2018 and 2019, tens of thousands of nurses, teachers and doctors held nationwide strikes against the crisis in hospitals and schools, caused by decades of underfunding.

The capitalists fear that these struggles could expand beyond the ability of the discredited, pro-capitalist trade unions to suppress and betray them. As in the 1930s and the 1951 waterfront dispute, governments will rely ever more heavily on the armed forces of the state to defend the profit system.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>