

Protests against police violence and racism continue in New Zealand

By Tom Peters
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Tens of thousands of people joined a second round of protests in Auckland and Wellington on June 14 in solidarity with the mass movement in the United States against the killing of George Floyd and police racism and violence more broadly.

In Wellington, as many as 20,000 people marched from Civic Square to parliament. Thousands more gathered at Aotea Square in Auckland and then marched to the US consulate, where they observed two minutes of silence for George Floyd. About 250 people also rallied in Dunedin.

Demonstrators were of all ages and they included white people, Māori, Pacific Islanders and immigrants from Asia, the US and Africa. They held home-made placards and chanted slogans including “No Justice, No Peace,” “Black Lives Matter,” “I can’t breathe,” and “No armed police.”

Expressing widely-held sentiments, one protester, Beth, commented on a Wellington Facebook page that she was attending “to say that, yes the system of racism is prevalent throughout the world. Everyone deserves a fair shot at life. As we are born into this world, none of us ask to be treated differently... If you can’t start to stand up for the well-being of your fellow beings now, then when?”

The protests reflect the growing movement to the left by workers and young people. They follow mass demonstrations last year against inaction on climate change, and nationwide strikes by healthcare workers and teachers.

It is not accidental that global protests against police violence have erupted during the coronavirus pandemic, which has exposed the ruling elites’ indifference to the deaths and suffering of working people. While New Zealand has avoided the horrific toll seen in other countries, unemployment and social

inequality soaring. are

Earlier rallies, held on June 1, were criticised by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern on the pretext that they breached coronavirus social-distancing rules. Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, from the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, said organisers should have been prosecuted. The Australian government has also threatened protesters with mass arrests.

Having lifted its COVID-19 restrictions, the Ardern government is seeking to defuse and contain the protests by feigning support. Faced with widespread opposition, police have backed away, for the time being, from a plan to introduce new armed units across the country.

Justice Minister Andrew Little told demonstrators outside parliament: “When well over half of the men in our prisons are Māori, when nearly two-thirds of women in our prisons are Māori, that tells you there is something wrong with the system.”

The prison population, in fact, has fallen only slightly under the Labour Party-Greens-NZ First coalition government, from 10,280 to 9,489. Little’s own ministry is projecting this will increase to 11,400 by 2029.

Prisons are severely overcrowded. Radio NZ reported that during New Zealand’s COVID-19 lockdown several prisons locked inmates in their cells 23 hours a day. Officials said this inhumane treatment was the only way to ensure social distancing.

The government has recruited an extra 1,800 frontline police officers, an increase of 20 percent compared with the 2016 figures. It has also expanded police training programs in working-class schools, and introduced anti-democratic “anti-terror” and censorship legislation.

Protest organisers, however, promoted illusions in

reform, encouraging demonstrators to channel their anger into voting. Laura O'Connell Rapira, from the liberal protest group ActionStation, appealed to Little and the Labour Party to "follow through on your promise of justice transformation" if re-elected.

In Auckland, Julia Whaipooti, from the group JustSpeak, told the rally: "By design, colonial structures take power away from indigenous people and people of colour." Camille Nakhid, an Auckland University of Technology professor of social sciences, noted that M?ori and Pacific Islanders, and other ethnic minorities, have higher rates of incarceration and are "less likely to get the medicine we need."

Some speakers portrayed police violence as simply the product of racism that is supposedly rampant in the population. One speaker in Wellington called on protesters to "recognise how you are part of the problem... hold yourself accountable, recognise how you hold racism in your heart, how you hold anti-blackness in your heart."

These misguided conceptions are refuted by the massive international and multi-racial protests over the murder of George Floyd.

Racism undoubtedly plays a role in police brutality. However, the main reason M?ori are over-represented in prisons, and as victims of police brutality, is that they are one of the most impoverished sections of the working class. Areas such as South Auckland, with large M?ori and Pacific Island communities, have a larger and more heavily armed police presence compared with more affluent suburbs.

On Radio NZ today, Prime Minister Ardern described the murder of George Floyd as "horrifying" but once again refused to directly condemn police brutality in the US. She stated that "New Zealand has always been a nation that stands against racism, discrimination and that kind of violence."

Asked what she would do in response to the protests, Ardern said her government will boost "M?ori representation" in District Health Boards, the police and the broader justice system. This would help "achieve what we all want--communities where people feel safer," she said.

Such changes to the ethnic mix within state institutions will do nothing to reduce police brutality or improve services for the working class, M?ori and non-M?ori. Last August, Police Minister Stuart Nash

boasted that M?ori "currently make up around 13 percent of the Police workforce" (M?ori are 16.5 percent of NZ's population). "Diversity" has increased in tandem with militarisation and a major increase in killings by officers.

For decades, Labour and National Party governments have sought to divide M?ori from non-M?ori workers through this type of race-based identity politics. A thin layer of M?ori has been brought into the state bureaucracy, universities, businesses and the political establishment, while the vast majority remains mired in poverty.

Workers and young people who joined the weekend's protests must oppose the attempts to use such divisive racist politics to steer them behind the Labour Party or its ally, the Greens. These are the very parties that have boosted the police and military and formed a coalition with the NZ First Party, adopting its xenophobic and anti-immigrant policies.

In preparation for the struggles ahead, a campaign must be waged to unite workers, of every ethnicity and nationality, based on a socialist and internationalist program that represents their shared class interests.

The government is now presiding over rapidly rising social inequality, which is expected to reach levels unseen since the 1930s. Whoever wins the coming election will further strengthen the armed forces of the state in preparation to suppress mass opposition to poverty and militarism.

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