

This article focuses on the social, economic, and political conditions that contributed to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It identifies the key developments in the global political economy that facilitated the rapid global spread of the virus before considering the economic impact of the pandemic and the widely varying policy responses of governments (with a particular focus on China, UK, the US, and New Zealand). The article then focuses on the impact of the pandemic on New Zealand politics, particularly in light of the 2020 and 2023 elections, the rise of the far right, and the prospects for a National-led government being re-elected in 2026. Centrally, the article highlights the vital importance of staunchly defending elimination strategies, including the Sixth Labour Government's elimination strategy, against right-wing detractors. It argues that the most effective way to oppose far right ideas, policies, and protests, many of which are profoundly racist, sexist, and transphobic, centrally involves organising mass militant counter-protests.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and its Continuing Impact on New Zealand Politics

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The COVID-19 pandemic is old news. It's over, and we are all over it! But, of course, it isn't over, and we can't afford to be over it. The pandemic remains an important topic for several reasons. First, the pandemic has had a major impact on New Zealand politics, including, among other things, influencing the outcomes of the 2020 and 2023 elections, fuelling the rise of the far right, and shaping political responses to the release of the Royal Commission's Phase 1 reports in late 2024. The Sixth National-led Government has established 'Phase 2' of the Royal Commission, staffed with carefully selected right-wing personnel and terms of reference focused on vaccine mandates and lockdowns.¹ The Phase 2 reports are scheduled to be released in February of 2026, suggesting that the political fallout from the pandemic is likely to be a factor in the 2026 elections. In essence, National, ACT, and NZ First, in conjunction with the far right, are trying to cast the Sixth Labour Government's elimination strategy in the most negative light possible for political gain. In the process, they are making it likely that the response to a future pandemic will be much weaker and less effective, especially if a centre-right government is in power.

1 Brooke van Velden, 'Phase 2 of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into COVID-19 Lessons', Press Release, New Zealand Government, 27 August, 2024.

Second, viewed from the perspective of medical science, SARS CoV-2 is continuing to infect and reinfect vast numbers of people on a global scale. Tedros Ghebreyesus – the World Health Organisation (WHO) Director-General – on 5 May 2023 declared ‘COVID-19 is over as a global health emergency’. This statement was widely reported. Much less widely reported were the accompanying remarks:

This virus is here to stay. It is still killing, and it’s still changing. The risk remains of new variants emerging that cause new surges in cases and deaths. The worst thing any country could do now is to use this news as a reason to let down its guard, to dismantle the systems it has built, or to send the message to its people that COVID-19 is nothing to worry about.²

The statistical information on the scale of continuing rates of infection, illness, and death has weakened as most governments have ceased rigorous monitoring. But the WHO Coronavirus Dashboard shows that cumulative confirmed cases had reached at least 778.2 million and there have been 7,097,572 deaths by 15 June, 2025.³ In New Zealand, the cumulative total was 4,691 deaths, where COVID-19 was an underlying or contributing factor, by 30 June, 2025. A review of weekly deaths attributable to COVID-19 during 2024 and the first weeks of 2025 ranged from one to 34, with a weekly average of 12.6.⁴ The ‘worst thing any country could do’ is precisely what the Sixth National Government is doing as it encourages people to effectively believe that COVID-19 is nothing to worry about and it removes funding for COVID-19 management and responses, such as RAT testing. The removal of mask wearing mandates and other public health measures encourages us to believe that the health threat has diminished to a

2 Tedros Ghebreyesus, ‘WHO Director-General’s Opening Remarks at the Media Briefing’, WHO (website), 5 May, 2023.

3 World Health Organisation (WHO), COVID-19 Dashboard, WHO, accessed 4 July, 2025.

4 Ministry of Health, ‘COVID-19: Current Cases’, accessed 15 February, 2025.

point whereby we no longer need to worry about contracting and spreading the virus. The facts suggest otherwise.

Immunity to COVID-19 whether from vaccination or infection wanes over time, and variants of concern (VOC) will continue to emerge, which means that for decades to come there will be a continuing need for ‘next-generation vaccines with increased breadth of protection, durability, and ability to block infection and transmission’.⁵ Furthermore, clinical evidence clearly shows that SARS-CoV-2 infection, including cases where patients initially experience mild illness, causes long-term organ damage to liver, kidneys, heart, brain, and skin. As Ziyad Al-Aly, et al. observe, the associated onset of various diseases affecting these organs ‘are chronic conditions that require lifelong care and the rise in their prevalence will have wide ramifications on every sector of our lives, including labour participation, economic productivity and societal wellbeing. Governments and health systems must therefore be prepared to deal with the impending rise in patients in need of health care.’⁶ Furthermore, ‘[i]t is estimated that 6–20 percent of people infected with SARS-CoV-2 worldwide experience features consistent with long COVID’.⁷ The long-term negative health effects on current and future generations, and the inadequacy of public health policy responses, are yet another example of young people being disproportionately negatively impacted by neoliberal policy responses to pressing problems.

This article aims to provide a condensed overview of the political economy of the pandemic to push back simultaneously against, firstly, the depiction of the pandemic as an ‘external shock’ by mainstream economists and, secondly, against right-wing revisionist accounts of the Sixth Labour

5 Reshma Mukesh, Claude Yinda, Vincent Munster, V.J. et al., ‘Beyond COVID-19: The Promise of Next-Generation Coronavirus Vaccines’, *NPJ: Viruses, Nature*, no. 39 (2024), 1.

6 Ziyad Al-Aly, Anupam Agarwal, Nisreen Alwan, and Valerie Luyckx, ‘Long COVID: Long-term Health Outcomes and Implications for Policy and Research’, *Nature Reviews Nephrology* 19, nos. 1–2 (2023), 1–2.

7 Best Practice Advocacy Centre New Zealand (BACNZ), ‘Long COVID: An Evolving Enigma’, BACNZ Paper, June 2023, 1–11.

Government's elimination strategy. It traces the origins and spread of COVID-19 to establish the social, economic, and political causes of the pandemic in order to show that the causes of the pandemic were internal to the capitalist system. The article then explores the continuing impact of the pandemic on New Zealand politics, focusing on the Sixth Labour Government's elimination strategy, Labour's landslide victory in the 2020 election, the rise of the far right, the factors contributing to Labour's defeat in the 2023 election, and the prospects for National being re-elected in 2026. The final section considers the political implications of the pandemic's impact on New Zealand politics for those seeking a left alternative to the neoliberalism of National and the zombified Third Way social democracy of Labour.

Not a Shock

International economic agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and World Bank, presented the COVID-19 pandemic as an external shock, operating on the basis of neoclassical assumptions about the self-adjusting and equilibrating tendencies of market economies. This conclusion is a typical response by those based in the mainstream neoclassical tradition of economic thought, because at the core of this tradition is the idea that market economies are inherently self-adjusting entities. Market, in this worldview, tend towards an optimal market clearing equilibrium, unless external factors prevent this from happening, such as natural disasters, the outbreak of war, or the existence of regulatory barriers to market competition, extensive union membership, and minimum wage legislation. Economic crises are thus always explained with reference to events and developments that are depicted as external to the economic system. With this in mind, it's important to note that the presentation of the pandemic as a shock external to the capitalist system is a falsehood that serves an important ideological role, deflecting attention from the real causes of the pandemic that were almost entirely *internal* to the capitalist global political economy. A student of mine summed up the factors

involved in the origins and spread of SARS-CoV-2 remarkably well. : ‘The COVID-19 pandemic was a product of the system it infected’.⁸ Although the virus emerged within an animal population with zoonotic transfer to humans, this transfer and the subsequent emergence of the pandemic was primarily a product of the neoliberal and capitalist configuration of societies, economies, politics, and human interaction with the natural environment.

The emergence of what became a pandemic, after widespread transmission of COVID-19 began in Wuhan, China, in January and February of 2020, surprised many, but it was not unexpected. The socialist evolutionary biologist and phylogeographer, Rob Wallace, in his 2016 book, *Big Farms Make Big Flu*, outlines the reasons why microbiologists, evolutionary biologists, phylogeographers, and epidemiologists, as early as 1982, predicted that ‘southern China would serve as ground zero for the next influenza pandemic’.⁹ Furthermore, these conditions ‘have since only intensified with China’s liberalizing economy’.¹⁰ Obviously, COVID-19 is not influenza, but the origins and spread of the pathogen in Wuhan and the province of Hubei are consistent with the analysis of infectious diseases in Wallace’s book.¹¹ The Chinese government played a role in ‘allowing conditions that have led to a gathering epidemiological disaster’.¹² These conditions included the loosely regulated, government promoted, and profit-driven expansion of wildlife farming and wet markets in Wuhan and Hubei.¹³

8 Thanks to my student Ella Welch, from POLS 323: Marxism (University of Otago), for making this point.

9 Rob Wallace, *Big Farms Make Big Flu: Dispatches on Infectious Disease, Agribusiness, and the Nature of Science* (Monthly Review Press, 2016), 24.

10 Wallace, *Big Farms Make Big Flu*, 24.

11 Rob Wallace, *Dead Epidemiologists: On the Origins of COVID-19* (Monthly Review Press, 2020), 42–57.

12 Wallace, *Big Farms Make Big Flu*, 25.

13 Sarah Boseley, ‘Calls for Global Ban on Wild Animal Markets amid Coronavirus Outbreak’, *The Guardian*, 24 January, 2020.

In February 2020, a report in *The Guardian* observed,

20,000 wildlife farms raising species including peacocks, civet cats, porcupines, ostriches, wild geese, and boar have been shut down across China in the wake of the coronavirus, in a move that has exposed the hitherto unknown size of the industry. Until a few weeks ago wildlife farming was still being promoted by government agencies as an easy way for rural Chinese people to get rich. A 2017 report by the Chinese Academy of Engineering on the development of the wildlife farming industry valued wildlife-farming industry operations at 520bn yuan, or £57bn.¹⁴

The original zoonotic transfer to the human population has not yet been definitively established, but nonetheless wildlife farming remains a likely candidate. More generally, there were a series of social, economic, and political factors that played crucial roles in the origins and spread of the virus, including the specific configuration of large-scale agribusiness, initially modelled on similar operations in the United States, especially those producing chicken and duck meat; rapid economic growth; population growth; proletarianisation; and urbanisation. In China, and globally, ecological devastation and habitat loss has driven wildlife animal populations into closer proximity to human populations, increasing the risks of zoonotic transfer of pathogens.¹⁵

Early governmental responses to the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 in China were weak. Initially, city and provincial authorities tried to suppress the release of accurate information to the public. Then, as irrefutable evidence emerged that the virus was spreading rapidly in Wuhan, central government authorities released information to the public from 31 December 2019

14 Michael Standert, 'Coronavirus Closures Reveal Vast Scale of China's Secretive Wildlife Farm Industry', *The Guardian*, 25 February, 2020.

15 Wallace, *Big Farms Make Big Flu*, 297–315; John Vidal, 'Destruction of Habitat and Loss of Biodiversity are Creating the Perfect Conditions for Diseases like COVID-19 to Emerge', *Ensis*, 17 March, 2020.

onwards. In January 2020, the response of the central government became much better than its response had been to SARS-CoV-1 in the early 2000s. By mid-January, central government health authorities had fully recognised the seriousness of the situation, and they decided to act quickly to contain the spread of the virus. Wuhan was placed in lockdown on 23 January. The central Chinese government used its repressive apparatus and high-tech surveillance capability to forcefully impose a comprehensive lockdown on all of Hubei province, close the province's border, introduce tight restrictions on travel within China, extend the Lunar New Year school holidays, build emergency hospitals capable of treating thousands of COVID-19 patients in Wuhan, and rapidly initiate mass testing and contact tracing. Although the response was not perfect, the overall management of the pandemic by the central Chinese authorities was vastly superior, on multiple levels, to that of the federal government in the US.¹⁶

The above, however, is not to suggest that China's strategy was entirely successful. In particular, no effective exit was developed from its zero-COVID-19 strategy. Draconian health restrictions and insufficient levels of government-provided income support generated a wave of unrest across the country in November 2022. Furthermore, the central government had been slow in facilitating and promoting effective vaccination, which meant that the death toll was higher than it needed to be once public health restrictions were loosened. The government gave preference to vaccines made in China, such as CoronaVac and Sinopharm, and the timing of the removal of public health restrictions was not based on vaccination rates.¹⁷ The situation was exacerbated by the comparatively low level of public health care provision in China, with access to adequate health care often depending on an ability to pay private providers.

16 Radhika Desai, 'The US vs China: Economic Models in the Pandemic Stress Test', *The Japanese Political Economy* 46, nos. 2–3 (2020), 102–126.

17 Hao Yang, Hao Tan, Jintao Zhang, and Mengying Yang, 'China's Pivot from Zero-COVID Strategy and the Role of Vaccines', *Health Policy and Technology* 13, no. 1, (2024), 100786.

Spread

Key developments in the Chinese and global political economy facilitated the rapid global spread of SARS-CoV-2. In addition to rapid industrialisation, proletarianisation, and urbanisation within China, the large increase of international tourism from 2009 to 2019 played a key role in the spread of the virus. By 2018, international tourism generated \$US1.7 trillion of revenue, and it was worth 29 percent of global services exports and 7 percent of world exports.¹⁸ The number of international travellers increased dramatically from 952 million in 2010 to 1.46 billion in 2019.¹⁹ Apart from the negative environmental impact of so much human movement, particularly with respect to rising carbon emissions from international air travel, international tourism facilitated the rapid spread of the virus. In particular, the decade from 2009–2019 saw ‘record growth for the cruise industry’, with passenger numbers increasing from 17.8 million in 2009 to 30 million in 2019.²⁰ As is well known, the world’s cruise ships have de-unionised crews and they are generally run under flags of convenience, enabling their corporate operators to avoid effective health and safety, environmental, and employment relations regulations. Within the context of world tourism, cruise ships played a key role as giant incubators and spreaders of the virus in the early months of 2020.²¹

Since roughly the late 1970s, government policymaking and regulation has proven to be woefully inadequate with respect to ensuring environmental sustainability and safeguarding public health, animal welfare, and biodiversity. The spread of the virus was therefore also aided by the role that neoliberalism played, over several decades, in weakening

18 World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), *World Tourism Barometer* 17, no. 2 (2019), 1.

19 World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), *World Tourism Barometer* 18, no. 1 (2020), 5.

20 Joseph Micallef, ‘State of the Cruise Industry: Smooth Sailing into the 2020s’, *Forbes*, 20 January 2020.

21 See, for example, Grace Chan, ‘Cruising in an Era of Coronavirus’, ‘Friends of the Earth’ (blog), 22 July, 2020.

public health systems and disease prevention agencies. There are too many examples of this phenomenon to list here, but amongst the most notorious was Trump's disestablishment of the National Security Council Directorate for Global Health and Biodefense. Another example is the woefully inadequate funding of the EU's European Centre for Communicable Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), which prior to the pandemic was 'understaffed and under resourced, with under 300 staff and an annual budget of only around EUR60 million to cover a population of over 500 million people'.²² But more important is the fact that in a large majority of countries during the neoliberal decades, public health systems were underfunded and reorganised according to new public management models, which meant that these systems were already under pressure to provide adequate health services prior to the pandemic.

Among other things, neoliberalism is a ruling-class project aimed at increasing profitability by weakening the collective organisation and bargaining power of workers, facilitated and then in turn supported by a profound and enduring shift in the balance of power between the sociopolitical forces on either side of the capital/labour divide, shaped by the shift in the prevailing economic orthodoxy from Keynesianism to monetarism, and entrenched by the institutional reconfiguration of the overall state apparatus resulting from neoliberal public sector reform and related legislative and institutional changes. I strongly agree with Damien Cahill's critique of idealist interpretations of the rise and entrenchment of neoliberalism, in which the adoption and implementation of neoliberal policies is largely explained in terms of the influence of neoliberal ideas.²³ Hence neoliberalism is not simply about the implementation of a particular set of ideas derived from what Philip Mirowski dubs 'the neoliberal thought

22 Michael Anderson and Elias Mossialos, 'Time to Strengthen Capacity in Infectious Disease Control at the European Level', *International Journal of Infectious Diseases* 99 (2020), 263.

23 Damien Cahill, *The End of Laissez-Faire? On the Durability of Embedded Neoliberalism* (Edward Elgar, 2014).

collective’.²⁴ Although this transmission of ideas might occur to varying degrees, it is by no means the sole defining feature of neoliberalism. It is, indeed, the case that ‘neoliberalism is embedded in three distinct, but related social spheres: class relations, institutions and ideological norms’.²⁵ Neoliberalism also rests upon the underlying capitalist economic system, which it helped to reconfigure in the 1980s and 1990s, contributing to growing power and influence of financial capital, both domestically and internationally via the rise of the Dollar-Wall Street Regime in the wake of the collapse of Bretton Woods.²⁶ Nor is neoliberalism simply about reducing the size of state expenditure in quantitative terms, since levels of expenditure can be maintained while reconfigured in ways favourable to capital, such as fully or partially privatised provision of infrastructure, social services, prisons, and so forth. Neoliberalism is best understood as giving rise to historically specific policy regimes involving enduring configurations of elite ideology, governing arrangements and actors, interest group influence, impacts, and evaluative measures.²⁷ When viewed historically, comparatively, and empirically, neoliberal policy regimes vary widely but nonetheless retain a sufficient proportion of common core features to warrant the label ‘neoliberal’.²⁸

24 Philip Mirowski, ‘Postface: Defining Neoliberalism’, in *The Road from Mont Pelerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*, eds. Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (Harvard University Press, 2009), 417–56.

25 Cahill, *The End of Laissez-Faire?*, ix.

26 See Peter Gowan, *The Global Gamble: Washington’s Faustian Bid for World Dominance* (Verso, 1999); Byron Richards, ‘The Dollar-Wall Street Regime and New Zealand’, *New Zealand Sociology* 25, no.1 (2010), 26–52; David McNally, *Blood and Money: War, Slavery, Finance, and Empire* (Haymarket Books, 2020).

27 Brian Roper, ‘New Zealand Politics, Post-1984’, in *Government and Politics in Aotearoa New Zealand*, eds. Janine Hayward, Lara Greaves, and Claire Timperley (Oxford University Press, 2021), 26.

28 For more on this topic, see Brian Roper, ‘Making Sense of Neoliberalism in Aotearoa/New Zealand: A Response to Nicholls, Duncan, Neilson, and Foucauldian Governmentality’, *New Zealand Sociology* 39, no. 1, (2024), 39–59.

Economic Impact and the Polycrisis

The world economy experienced a ‘synchronised slowdown’ of economic and trade growth in the years immediately preceding the pandemic.²⁹ The immediate impact of COVID-19 was to turn the slowdown into a deep global recession. In April 2020, the IMF announced that ‘[i]t is very likely that this year the global economy will experience its worst recession since the Great Depression, surpassing that seen during the (GFC) a decade ago. The Great Lockdown, as one might call it, is projected to shrink global growth dramatically’.³⁰ A year later, the IMF estimated the global growth contraction of 3.5 percent for 2020. It observed a ‘severe contraction that has had particularly adverse employment and earnings impacts on . . . [y]outh, women, workers with relatively lower educational attainment, and the informally employed. Income inequality is likely to increase significantly because of the pandemic’.³¹ To this list we can add elderly, disabled, and ethnic minorities and the fact that the health, economic, and social impacts of the pandemic have been much worse in the Global South. The recession and associated rapid rise of unemployment thus increased existing structural inequalities within society, and between wealthy and poor countries.

Although the world economy bounced back strongly in 2021, with the IMF estimating that the 2.7 percent contraction of global economic growth in 2020 would be followed by a growth spike of 6.6 percent in 2021, the recovery was uneven across different countries and regions, with developing economies suffering longer term effects.³²

29 International Monetary Fund (IMF), *World Economic Outlook: Manufacturing Downturn, Rising Trade Barriers* (IMF Publication Services, 2019), xiv; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *OECD Economic Outlook* 106 (2019), 7.

30 International Monetary Fund (IMF), *World Economic Outlook: Chapter 1*, v.

31 International Monetary Fund (IMF), *World Economic Outlook: Managing Divergent Recoveries* (IMF Publication Services, 2021), xvi.

32 International Monetary Fund (IMF), *World Economic Outlook: Policy Pivot, Rising Threats* (IMF Publication Services, October 2024), 115.

As the World Bank observes:

more than four years after the upheavals of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent global shocks, it's clear the world—and developing economies, in particular—has yet to rediscover a reliable path to prosperity. Global growth is stabilizing at a rate insufficient for progress on key development goals—2.7 percent a year on average through 2026, well below the 3.1 percent average in the decade before COVID-19.³³

The recovery did little more than partially alleviate the suffering of those most severely impacted by the recession, especially those in the Global South. According to the same World Bank report, 'by 2026, countries that are home to more than 80 percent of the world's population would still be growing more slowly, on average, than they were in the decade before COVID-19'.³⁴ Furthermore, the consensus of recent reports from the IMF, OECD, and World Bank is that the global economy continues to grow slowly and remains vulnerable to risks 'on the downside' such as rising geopolitical tensions, an 'intensification of protectionist policies', China's debt-ridden and contracting property sector, financial crises, and rising social tensions.³⁵

The pandemic is best understood as forming part of a global polycrisis, encompassing, among other things, the ecological crisis, a global water crisis, economic and financial crises, escalating military conflicts, including the Zionist genocide in Gaza, rising geopolitical tensions, intensifying inter-imperialist rivalry between China and the US, mass migration and increasingly large refugee populations, the rise of fascism and the far right, social and political unrest, and the continuing dominance of neoliberalism

33 World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects*, June 2024, xv.

34 World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects*, xv.

35 IMF, *World Economic Outlook: Policy Pivot*, xiv, 155; OECD, *Economic Outlook, Interim Report: Turning the Corner*, (OECD Publishing, 2024), 4, 15; World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects*, xv.

despite its role in fuelling these crises.³⁶ Originally coined by French theorist of complexity Edgar Morin, the concept has been more recently popularised by a President of the European Commission (Jean-Claude Juncker) and economic historian Adam Tooze, and then elaborated upon by Marxist theorist Alex Callinicos.³⁷ When used by Tooze and Callinicos, the term ‘polycrisis’ does not refer to multiple separate crises, but rather inter-connected, inter-acting, mutually reinforcing, multidimensional, and accelerating crises. Various conceptualisations of polycrisis are emerging in a rapidly expanding literature.³⁸ I share Callinicos’s view that polycrisis is best conceptualised in conjunction with, and as part of, the application of Marxian methodology, particularly the conception of totality, and a critical analysis of 21st-century capitalism. As suggested by the title of his recent book, Callinicos argues humankind has entered a ‘new age of catastrophe’.³⁹ This world historical context is characterised, among other things, by the simultaneous intensification, generalisation, and acceleration of the multiple crises referred to above. Marxism differs fundamentally from other approaches to conceptualising the polycrisis, with its insistence that ‘conceptualising capitalism as a developing totalisation is . . . intimately connected with insisting that the world doesn’t have to be the way it is, that there are other possible worlds, some of which would represent an improvement on the present one’.⁴⁰

36 Adam Tooze, ‘Welcome to the World of the Polycrisis’, *Financial Times*, 29 October, 2022; Alex Callinicos, *The New Age of Catastrophe* (Polity Press, 2023), 5–7.

37 David Henig and Daniel M. Knight, ‘Polycrisis: Prompts for an Emerging World-View’, *Anthropology Today* 39, no. 2 (2023), 3–6.

38 In addition to the sources above, see: Michael Albert, *Navigating the Polycrisis: Mapping the Futures of Capitalism and the Earth* (MIT Press, 2024); Hebatallah Adam and Ravinder Rena, eds., *Polycrisis and Economic Development in the Global South* (Routledge, 2025); Tamsin Parnell, Tom Van Hout, and Dario Del Fante, eds., *Critical Approaches to Polycrisis: Discourses of Conflict, Migration, Risk, and Climate* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

39 Callinicos, *The New Age*.

40 Callinicos, *The New Age*, 11.

Government Policy Responses

The pandemic's role in the polycrisis can be mapped via government policy responses, as a broad array of government health policy responses and pandemic management strategies unfolded across the globe during 2020 and 2021. A small minority of the world's governments adopted and implemented effective elimination strategies using a combination of testing, tracing, isolating positive cases and their close contacts, lockdowns, border closures and quarantine regimes, and accurate public health information about SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19. These measures were implemented, in various ways, in Australia, China, Cuba, Hong Kong, Iceland, Latvia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Rwanda, Singapore, Vietnam, and Thailand.

In New Zealand, the Sixth Labour Government initially considered a suppression strategy aimed at 'flattening the curve' of the infection rate, but Ministry of Health modelling in February and March 2020 suggested that COVID-19 was likely to cause 12,700 deaths if the virus was suppressed rather than eliminated.⁴¹ The health system was likely to be overwhelmed if a suppression strategy had been adopted prior to generalised vaccination, especially given decades of cumulative underfunding of the public health system because of neoliberal fiscal austerity, among other things, which contributed to New Zealand having one of the lowest levels of Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds per-capita in the OECD 'at 4 per 100,000 population' (176 staffed ICU beds in 2021).⁴² In addition to these conditions, clear evidence was emerging from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore that transmission of the virus could be eliminated if appropriate public

41 Michael Baker, 'The 2020 Election, the Covid-19 Emergency, and the Need to Improve Our Response Capacity for Even More Serious Threats', in *Politics in a Pandemic: Jacinda Ardern and New Zealand's 2020 Election*, ed. Stephen Levine (Victoria University of Wellington Press, 2021), 194; see, also, Ivan Lutnant, 'Muddling Through Traffic Lights: The Sixth Labour Government's Science-Based Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic', MA dissertation, University of Otago, 2025, 53.

42 Paul J. Young, Alex Psirides, Stephen Streat, 'New Zealand's Staffed ICU Bed Capacity and COVID-19 Surge Capacity', *New Zealand Medical Journal* 134, no. 1545 (2022), 8–9.

health measures were adopted. Considerations such as these led to the New Zealand Government adopting a science-based elimination strategy.⁴³ It moved quickly to close the borders, establish quarantine capacity, increase testing and contact tracing capacity, develop four alert levels with level four involving a strict lockdown shutting down all but essential businesses and requiring all non-essential workers to stay at home. A range of economic policies were introduced to support the elimination strategy including:

an initial NZ\$12.1 billion COVID-19 Economic Response Package. Representing 4% of the country's GDP, the response package was one of the largest in the world on a per capita basis. Representing 4% of the country's GDP, the response package was one of the largest in the world on a per capita basis. The package included NZ\$5.1 billion in wage subsidies for affected businesses to pay workers up to 80% of their normal wages or salary rather than making staff redundant; NZ\$126 million in COVID-19 leave and self-isolation support; NZ\$2.8 billion income support package for the most vulnerable, including a permanent NZ\$25 per week benefit increase and a doubling of the Winter Energy Payment for 2020.⁴⁴

This initial package was followed by the establishment of the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund allocating 'NZ\$50 billion to help rebuild the economy and support recovery from the pandemic'.⁴⁵

The effectiveness of this policy response was greatly aided by the quality of Jacinda Ardern's leadership, which centrally involved intellectual sharpness and communicative clarity. The Lowy Institute's ranking of

43 Baker, 'The 2020 Election', 194–196; Ivan Lutnant, 'Muddling Through', 37–49.

44 Sophie Henderson and Matt Withers, 'Aotearoa New Zealand's Responses to COVID-19', in *Policy Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic: An International Comparative Approach*, eds. M. Jae Moon and Dong-Young Kim (Routledge, 2024), 164.

45 Henderson and Withers, 'Responses to COVID-19'.

responses by 116 countries placed the New Zealand Government first in January 2021.⁴⁶ Comparing mortality statistics for the UK, and factoring in the population difference, New Zealand's effective elimination strategy saved approximately 10,800 lives from January 2020 to September 2021. As Michael Baker notes, the elimination strategy 'gave New Zealand the lowest COVID-19 mortality rate in the OECD and less economic contraction than many countries pursuing suppression and mitigation strategies'.⁴⁷ In contrast, the policy responses of the Donald Trump Administration, Boris Johnson-led Conservative Government in the UK, and Jia Bolsonaro's presidential administration in Brazil were among the most notoriously and appallingly inept.

When critically evaluating the pandemic policy responses of various governments, it is obviously important to take account of a broad range of factors that determine the scale of SARS-CoV-2 infections and COVID-19 deaths within a particular country. Accordingly, as SARS-CoV-2 spread throughout the world, it highlighted the presence or absence of factors contributing to the escalation or reduction of infection and death rates, including the comparative economic prosperity, levels of inequality, unemployment and poverty, population density and urbanisation, geographical and climatic factors, the prevalence and distribution of pre-existing health problems, and the comparative level of welfare and other social provision. The extent to which major media channels facilitated accurate science-based public health messaging was also a significant factor, as were the magnitude of disinformation spread online by conspiracy theorists, evangelical Christians, and others on the far right, and political factors such as the party-political composition of government and the preparedness of key political leaders to adopt a science-based elimination strategy.

46 Stephen Dziedzic, 'New Zealand Tops Lowy Institute List as Country with Best Response to Coronavirus, Australia Sits Eighth', *ABC News*, 28 January 2021. The Lowy Institute is a politically right-of-centre think-tank based in Australia, but its country performance ranking is reasonably systematic and accords with information from other sources.

47 Baker, 'The 2020 Election', 193.

As soon as one considers factors such as these, it is immediately evident that policy responses need tailored according to the specific conditions prevailing in a particular country. A comprehensive lockdown, with the closure of most workplaces, universities, and schools, is feasible in a high-income country with a comparatively generous welfare system and robust health system, but much more difficult to implement in a populous poor country in the Global South. The right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) central government of India, led by Narendra Modi, attempted to impose a national lockdown in 2020 but without introducing supporting measures, such as distributing food to the poor, sufficiently increasing testing capacity, or building emergency health care facilities.⁴⁸ Although the challenges facing the Indian Government should be acknowledged, its inadequate policy response shouldn't be excused. In 2020, India spent \$US72.9 billion and 2.9 percent of its GDP on its military, making it the third largest military spender in the world, while it is 'among the countries having the lowest public healthcare budget in the world, with the public healthcare system in the country merely getting 1.26% of the total GDP'.⁴⁹ This lack of investment in the health system was a clearly a major contributor to waves of infection that swept through the country in 2021. In contrast, as Rwanda demonstrated, a country with low per capita income could develop an effective health system response to the pandemic.⁵⁰

The challenges facing countries in the Global South highlight the criminal irresponsibility of governments in advanced capitalist countries that failed to adopt effective elimination strategies from the outset. Not only did the lack of strategies cause hundreds of thousands of unnecessary deaths in these countries; it also contributed to the spread of the virus to much poorer countries, where the death toll has been tragically high. Government responses to the economic impact of the pandemic

48 N.R. Musahar, 'India's Starvation Measures', *New Left Review* 2/122 (2020), 29–34.

49 Dibyendu Mondal, 'India Spends Just 1.26% of GDP on Public Healthcare,' *The Sunday Guardian*, 2 January, 2021.

50 Eli Cahan, 'Rwanda's Secret Weapon against Covid-19: Trust', *BMJ*, 11 December, 2020, 371.

overwhelmingly favoured the rich. In the US, while the most severe impacts were being experienced by women, youth, students, workers, ethnic minorities and the Global South, the Trump Administration's fiscal response package provided a taxpayer funded bonanza for billionaires on Wall Street with the Dow Jones rising from 19,174 points on 15 March 2020 to around 33-35,000 points for much of 2021. As Robert Brenner observed, '[t]he scale of the bailout that the political authorities cooked up for big business was mind-boggling, but their lack of concern about monitoring its disbursement was more remarkable still'.⁵¹ Enormous sums of money were given to corporations with no strings attached, such as requiring recipients to keep their workers employed, allowing them to invest the money in the share market. Brenner noted:

Some \$4.586 trillion, roughly 75 per cent of the total \$6.286 trillion derived directly and indirectly from cares Act money, would go for the 'care' of the country's biggest and best-off companies. By contrast, as unemployment soared, just \$603 billion in total was allocated for direct cash payments to individuals and families (\$300 billion), extra unemployment insurance (\$260 billion), and student loans (\$43 billion).⁵²

The Trump administration's massive handout to big business was not an isolated response, but it was merely an extreme example of a wider pattern of fiscal responses to the recession by governments around the world. During the pandemic, Michael Roberts argued that 'emergency interest rate cuts and government stimulus measures often benefited those least in need of state support, helping their assets grow in value despite the economic downturn'. As a result, 'the super-rich 1% in the globe have increased their wealth hugely during the pandemic, particularly in places where households have suffered most from the impact of the pandemic,

51 Robert Brenner, 'Escalating Plunder', *New Left Review* 2/123 (2020), 5–22.

52 Brenner, 'Escalating Plunder', 7.

like Russia, Sweden, Brazil, India and the US'.⁵³

Explaining such a wide array of contrasting political and policy responses to the pandemic is challenging. From a Marxist perspective, it can be argued that at an abstract level that the internationally synchronised adoption of effective elimination strategies in the first half of 2020 could have minimised the negative impact of COVID-19 on global capital accumulation. But this conclusion would ignore the internal differentiation of interests within the world's capitalist classes and the reality that, as Callinicos writes, 'the divisions of the global capitalist class into competing firms and states impeded a rational and coordinated response in the case of the pandemic, just as it has done for many decades to climate change'.⁵⁴ It also assumes a willingness on the part of governments in Europe and North America to impose short-term pain on capital in order to minimise the negative impacts of the pandemic over a medium-term period. Clearly, this option wasn't the case in Spain, Germany, France, Sweden, Britain, or the US. The primary concern in these countries was to keep profits flowing in the short-term. The unnecessarily large negative impact on profitability that resulted from lax policy responses in the early stages of the pandemic was to a notable extent an unanticipated consequence. As such, lax policy responses to aspects of the polycrisis such as the pandemic and climate change, most notoriously exemplified by the Trump administrations, have been good for some capitalists but bad for capitalism as a whole.

This raises important questions for Marxists and other critically inclined scholars. Why are the governments of capitalist states failing to introduce policies most likely to ensure the long-term viability of the capitalist system? How do we explain this phenomenon? One of the central themes of Marxist state theory is that capitalist states work best for capitalism if they maintain a modicum of distance from the interests of individual capitalists, and sub-fractional groupings of capitalists, both because this distancing enhances the ideological legitimisation of capitalism and it provides a necessary

53 Michael Roberts, '1% Own 45% of the World's Personal Wealth While Nearly 3bn People have Little or No Wealth at All', Blogging of a Marxist Economist, Michael Roberts (blog), 24 June, 2021.

54 Callinicos, *New Age*, 47.

condition for states to act in the best interests of the system as a whole. This relationship between states and capitalists appears to be breaking down in the 2020s. Which aspects of Marxist state theory need to be re-thought in the process of making sense of the widely varying but generally inadequate quality of capitalist state policy responses to the polycrisis? More scholarly work needs to be done in response to these questions.⁵⁵

Comparative analysis of policy responses to the pandemic highlights that a complex array of factors combined to determine the effectiveness of such responses in particular countries. These factors include the timing, sequencing, stringency, and comprehensiveness of public health measures aimed at suppressing or eliminating the virus, the institutional configuration of the state (for example, unitary versus federal), the quality of communication with the public by political leaders, levels of public trust in the government, party political composition of government, levels of authoritarianism versus democracy, the level of economic development, the state of the public health system, the comparative strength of the welfare system, the fiscal capacity of the state to provide income during lockdowns, and the legal system.⁵⁶ The UK, US, Hungary, and Spain, for example, were compelled to implement public health restrictions in response to their health systems becoming overwhelmed by waves of infections, but these consequences could have been averted if these governments had closed their borders, introduced mass testing and contact tracing, and implemented comprehensive and effective lockdowns earlier. A general theme of policy

55 For interesting discussions of these issues see Alex Callinicos, *New Age*, 40–60; Mike Davis, *The Monster Enters: COVID-19, Avian Flu, and the Plagues of Capitalism* (Verso, 2022); Costas Panayotakis, ‘The COVID-19 Crisis: A Case of Capitalism’s Dialectic of Failure’, *Rethinking Marxism* 34, no. 3 (2022), 361–386; Rob Wallace, *The Fault in Our SARS: COVID-19 in the Biden Era*, (Monthly Review Press, 2023).

56 See, for example, Aleksandar Stojanović, Luisa Scarcella, Christina R. Mosalagae, eds., *The First 100 Days of Covid-19: Law and Political Economy of the Global Policy Response* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); M. Jae Moon and Dong-Young Kim, eds., *Policy Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic: An International Comparative Approach* (Routledge, 2024); Darren Lilleker, Ioana Coman, Miloš Gregor, Edoardo Novelli, eds., *Political Communication and COVID-19: Governance and Rhetoric in Times of Crisis* (Routledge, 2023).

responses, however, is that early implementation of restrictions was of limited value if there were multiple exceptions to these restrictions, as illustrated by the Czech Republic, where the government moved quickly to introduce restrictions but also allowed a wide range of exceptions, ultimately culminating in a comparatively high death rate (over 43,000 deaths in a country of 10.5 million people).⁵⁷

When reading the comparative literature, it is hard not to be overwhelmed by the sheer complexity of factors shaping policy responses in particular countries. The risk in acknowledging this complexity is that one loses sight of the fact that COVID-19 policy responses in some countries were highly successful in combating the disease, resulting in comparatively low death rates, comparatively light economic impacts, and less severe negative societal impacts. Border closures, adequate quarantine facilities, mask wearing mandates, mass testing and contact tracing, isolation of positive cases, highly-quality regulation and legislation, effective public health communication by political leaders, health officials, and health professionals, high levels of public trust in official health messaging, adequate levels of income support and social provision, well developed health systems, and extensive vaccination programmes saved large numbers of lives in those countries where these measures and conditions were present.

In so far as capitalist interests and lobbying played a role in pandemic responses, it appears that some of the worst policy responses occurred in countries, such as the US and UK, where influential sub-fractional groupings within the capitalist class were closely linked to, and supportive of, the prevailing leadership of the central government. New Zealand provides a contrasting example that confirms this line of analysis because the bulk of the capitalist class (with the exception of the tourism industry) supported the Labour-led Government's elimination strategy, and the effectiveness of the elimination strategy minimised the negative impact of the pandemic on economic activity and profitability. As the OECD observed in its 2022

57 Daniel Klimovský and Juraj Nemec, 'The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Responses from Various Policy Actors in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 2020', *SCIPap: Scientific Papers of the University of Pardubice* 29, no. 1 (2020), 1255.

economic survey of New Zealand, '[t]he economy rebounded strongly, regaining the pre-pandemic GDP level in the third quarter of 2020 and rising to 4.5% above the pre-COVID level by the second quarter of 2021, one of the strongest recoveries among OECD countries'.⁵⁸ Likewise, the ideological orientations and intellectual weaknesses of leading politicians also played an important role, as demonstrated by Trump's inability to grasp relevant scientific information and by Johnson's compounding failures, especially with the initial herd immunity response, including the failure to close the border early enough, privatising contact tracing, repeated premature relaxation of social distancing measures, and so forth.⁵⁹

To sum up. While some governments responded effectively, many failed to 'go hard and go early' with appropriate health and related policy measures in response to the pandemic. Once they were forced to respond they generally mismanaged the pandemic and simultaneously managed the recession in the interests of, and to the overwhelming benefit of, the rich and the powerful. Social inequalities increased as a result, and the poor, young, elderly, women, ethnic minorities, LGBTIQ+ communities, disabled, and peoples of the Global South suffered the most severe impacts of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Election 2023

The pandemic had a huge impact on New Zealand politics, contributing to Labour's remarkable landslide victory in the 2020 election and then playing a less substantial but still significant role in Labour's defeat in the 2023 election.⁶⁰

58 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Economic Surveys: New Zealand* (OECD Publishing, 2022), 12.

59 Colin Leys, 'We Can't Let the Tories Get Away with Britain's Covid Disaster', *Tribune*, 23 February, 2021.

60 See, for example, Stephen Levine, ed., *Politics in a Pandemic: Jacinda Ardern and the New Zealand General Election of 2020* (Victoria University Press, 2021); Jennifer Curtin, Lara Greaves, and Jack Vowles, eds., *A Team of Five Million? The 2020 'Covid-19' New Zealand General Election* (ANU Press, 2024); Stephen Levine, ed., *Back on Track? The New Zealand General Election of 2023* (Te Herenga Waka University Press, 2024).

In the 2020 election, Labour became the first political party to win more than 50 percent of the vote in the MMP era primarily because of widespread appreciation of the effectiveness of the elimination strategy and Ardern's strong leadership performance. Yet only three years later, Labour's support collapsed to 26.91 percent of the total vote. The 738,275 votes it received in 2023 amounted to 676,005 fewer votes than in 2020 when it received 1,443,545 votes, almost double National's total (738,275).⁶¹ This development raises the obvious questions: Why did Labour lose the 2023 election? What role did the lingering impacts of COVID-19 have on the election results?

A careful review of political polling during the Sixth Labour Government's second term shows that, firstly, Labour steadily lost support relative to National from January 2021 to May 2022 when National establishes a narrow lead in polls of polls.⁶² The final level 4 lockdown in Auckland from August to November of 2021 was widely viewed as unpopular, but in so far as it had a discernible impact on Labour's popularity, it appears merely to have solidified an earlier trend. Secondly, the polls illustrate that the anti-mandate protests and occupation of parliament grounds in February of 2022 marked a turning point with respect to ACT and NZ First, both of whom expressed support for the concerns of the protestors. ACT leader David Seymour claimed that neither he nor the ACT Party were opposed to vaccination but rather to state-imposed vaccine mandates. Winston Peters and NZ First opposed vaccine mandates and pandered to conspiracy disinformation about vaccine safety.⁶³

61 Electoral Commission: Te Kaitiaki Take Kōwhiri, 'New Zealand Election Results', accessed 19 February, 2025.

62 Chris Know and Thomas Coughlan, 'Poll of Polls: National Likely to Need Winston Peters, Chance of Needing a Second Election Rises', *New Zealand Herald*, 28 September, 2023; Stephen Mills and Thomas Butt, 'A Perfect Storm: Survey Findings and the 2023 Election', in *Back on Track?*, 231–258.

63 Mills and Butt, 'A Perfect Storm', 234–235; Luke Oldfield, 'Populists, Populism and the 2023 Election,' in *Back on Track?*, 261–262. See, also, Thomas Coughlan, 'Parliament Protesters Buoyed by Support from Winston Peters', *New Zealand Herald*, 10 February, 2022; Glen McConnell, 'Why is there a Second Covid-19 Royal Commision of Inquiry?', *Stuff*, 29 November, 2024.

The increasing popularity of ACT and NZ First relates to one of the largest and, unfortunately, most lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic – the rise of the far right and its growing influence on mainstream politics. There was a degree of heterogeneity with respect to the social and political composition of the several thousand anti-mandate protestors who occupied parliament grounds from the 8th of February to the 2nd of March 2022, including Pākehā alternative life stylers, some Māori who understandably viewed the Government’s vaccine mandates as yet another instance of White settler-state coercion, middle-class libertarians, small business owners in services and owner-operators in the trades, evangelical Christians among whom Destiny Church’s Freedom and Rights Coalition (TFRC) provided initial leadership, lumpen proletarians, fascists, and neo-Nazis. But undoubtedly there were significant elements of the far right at play.⁶⁴ Indeed, listing several key groups and individuals supporting the campaign against vaccination could be described as part of New Zealand’s contemporary far right, such as Destiny Church, The Freedom and Rights Coalition, Voices for Freedom, New Conservative Party, Counterspin Media, NZ Doctors Speaking Out With Science, Convoy 2022, Freedom Alliance NZ, Action Zealandia, Bryan Tamaki, Rodney Hide, Kelvyn Alp, Hannah Spierer, Leighton Baker, Chantal Baker, Philip Arps, and Matt King. Likewise, disinformation via online platforms, such as Telegraph, Counterspin, Twitter, played a key role in fuelling the occupation and broadcasting the occupation to a wider national and international online audience.

A study by The Disinformation Project, based at the University of Auckland and ‘originally founded in February 2020 to understand the spread of emerging COVID-19 disinformation’, concluded:

64 The Editors, ‘The Anti-Mandate Occupation’, *ISO Aotearoa*, 14 February, 2022; Gordan Campbell, ‘On Why Compromise Isn’t an Option’, *Scoop*, 14 February, 2022; Marc Daalder, ‘“Splintered Realities”: How NZ Convoy Lost Its Way’, *Newsroom*, 11 February, 2022.

mis- and disinformation related to COVID-19 acts as a Trojan Horse to push followers towards more violently exclusive, supremacist, xenophobic, racist, far-right and extremist ideologies. We saw this play out at the protest. The ostensibly original and more moderate goals of the Convoy were pushed aside and replaced with extremist narrative frames, including calling for the weaponised storming of Parliament, the execution of public servants, academics, journalists, politicians, and healthcare workers.⁶⁵

In other words, the political and ideological trajectory of these protests tended eventually towards a fascist radicalisation of hostility towards the New Zealand Government and defenders of its public health measures.

Fascism in the 21st century differs in some respects from the fascism of the 1920s and 1930s, which combined a political style that involved revolutionary opposition to elements of the status quo. It was ‘an ideology that counterposed a racially defined “national community” to destructive outsiders – crucially “cosmopolitan Jewish finance capital” – and was characterised by virulent anti-Marxism’. It required the construction of a mass movement with a paramilitary wing recruited especially from the petty bourgeoisie and relatively privileged professional middle class, and displayed ‘a tendency to radicalization that found its fullest expression in the pursuit of imperial conquest and in the wartime Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews of Europe’.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Paxton’s definition accurately captures central elements of fascism in the 21st century. He contends that it involves

a form of political behaviour marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and

65 Kate Hannah, Sanjana Hattotuwa, and Kayli Taylor, ‘The Murmuration of Information Disorders: Aotearoa New Zealand’s Mis- and Disinformation Ecologies and the Parliament Protest’, *The Disinformation Project*, May 2022, 15–16.

66 Alex Callinicos, *The New Age*, 124–131.

purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.⁶⁷

Fascism in this respect is 'a form of mass politics, characterised by rallies, marches and violence against its opponents, reflecting a fascist goal to purge the existing state'.⁶⁸

The contemporary far right differs from the fascism of the 1920s and 1930s because it is less directly concerned with counter-revolutionary opposition to the advances of the left, emerging as it has in a context where the far left is much weaker than it was a century ago.⁶⁹ Ideologically, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism is a central dynamic on the new far right, while hostility to the left and anti-Semitism remain important, although less central, elements. This pernicious ideological mix bizarrely combines anti-Semitism with support for Zionist Israel, 'which is seen as a bulwark against the Muslim hordes that supposedly threaten Western civilization'.⁷⁰ Contemporary far-right ideology also weaves together transphobia, reactionary antipathy to feminist gains in relation to reproductive rights and sexual violence, opposition to policies aimed at increasing inclusiveness and diversity, attacks on academic freedom and universities for spreading a 'woke mind virus', and climate change denial. The rise of the far right has also involved 'the predominance of racist-populist electoral parties with a dangerous and substantial fascist element'.⁷¹ Far-right parties have been aided in this regard by the radicalisation of the conservatism of some centre-right parties, such as the Christian Democrats in Germany and Republican

67 Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 218.

68 David Renton, *The New Authoritarians: Convergence on the Right* (Pluto Press, 2019), 17.

69 Chamsy El-Ojeili, 'Confronting Fascism: Socialist Knowledge and the Far Right in Interwar Europe', *Counterfutures* 14 (2023), 113–114.

70 Callinicos, *The New Age*, 122.

71 Callinicos, *The New Age*, 122.

Party in the US, which has boosted the electoral popularity of far-right parties by giving them political respectability and helping to mainstream their ideas and policies.⁷²

The 2022 anti-mandate occupation in Wellington and associated protests were heavily influenced by these related international developments. As Callinicos observes, '[t]he movements that have developed to contest the necessity of anti-COVID lockdowns and to oppose vaccination, and especially government-required vaccine mandates, are striking evidence of the dynamism of the far right and its ability to latch onto new issues'.⁷³ A related international trend that also became evident in during 2022 and 2023 was a transformation and convergence on the right of the mainstream centre-right, the non-fascist far right, and a generally smaller fascist far right. Among other things, this convergence involved breaking down the gate-keeping role played by centre-right and centre-left parties during the period from the end of the Second World War to the GFC, a role that maintained the effective exclusion of far-right parties from the political mainstream. Centre-right parties have moved rightwards by taking onboard racist populism, scapegoating immigrants and refugees for social problems, and encouraging Islamophobia, while some fascist parties shed more objectionable elements of their politics to achieve electoral success. In this context, '[c]o-operation between the mainstream and the extreme right has given the latter an influence out of all proportion to their support'.⁷⁴ This development is exactly what transpired during and in the wake of the anti-mandate occupation of parliament grounds. The ambivalence displayed by National towards the protests, and the support provided by ACT and NZ First, aided the mainstreaming of far-right narratives. In turn, the protests were successful in undermining the popularity of the Sixth Labour

72 Thanks to my student Amandus Hopfgarten for bringing the radicalisation of conservative parties to my attention. See, also, Natascha Strobl, 'The Authoritarian Direction of Radicalised Conservatism', in *Drivers of Authoritarianism: Paths and Developments at the Beginning of the 21st Century*, eds. Günter Frankenberg and Wilhelm Heitmeyer (Edward Elgar, 2024), 151–164.

73 Callinicos, *The New Age*, 122.

74 Renton, *The New Authoritarians*, 11.

Government and its public health measures and coincided with both ACT and NZ First gaining more support as indicated by political polling.

It is important to face the disturbing reality that the far right is growing larger and more influential within New Zealand, while also recognising and analysing the main drivers of this growth.⁷⁵ Disinformation is key factor in this growth, as The Disinformation Project indicates:

When we started the project in 2020, our focus was on the COVID-19 pandemic and how false information contributed to people's responses to public health interventions. Since then, we have charted the descent of many New Zealanders into more extreme conspiratorial beliefs. These include widespread vaccine refusal, climate change denial, opposition to immigration, reductive beliefs around gender, anti-Māori racism, and hatred towards the LGBTQ+ community. In 2024, it's clear that the disinformation networks established or expanded during the pandemic are deeply connected to far-right, neo-Nazi, and accelerationist networks and actors – both domestic and foreign. Disinformation has become both more mainstream, and more connected to wider issues of political and social division, violence, extremism and national security.⁷⁶

It is, however, important to recognise that far-right ideas promise much but do little to alleviate the privations caused by the polycrisis and regressive

75 For illuminating recent accounts of the far right in New Zealand see Mark Dunick, 'Kyle Chapman, the National Front and Right-Wing Resistance', in *Histories of Hate: The Radical Right in Aotearoa*, eds. Matthew Cunningham, Marinus La Rooij, and Paul Spoonley (Otago University Press, 2022), 285–303; Paul Spoonley and Paul Morris, 'Identitarianism and the Alt-Right: A New Phase of Far-Right Politics in Aotearoa', in *Histories of Hate*, 305–324; Michael Daubs, 'Internationalising White Extremism: Far-Right Networks in New Zealand and Beyond', in *Histories of Hate*, 325–341; Isabella Gregory, 'The "Religious Right" in the 2020 Aotearoa New Zealand General Election', *Counterfutures* 15 (2024), 43–79.

76 The Disinformation Project, homepage, accessed 11 July 2025.

redistributions resulting from increasingly punitive neoliberal policies.⁷⁷

Another major driver of the rise of the far right is the failure of centre-left governments to break with neoliberalism and implement genuinely transformative policies.⁷⁸ Centre-left and centre-right governments have maintained neoliberal policy regimes since the early 1980s and have remained committed to neoliberalism in the wake of the GFC. For example, in New Zealand, where the Fifth and Sixth Labour Governments were in power for 15 years (1999–2008, 2017–2023), none of the lynchpins of the neoliberal policy regime have been removed and, with the partial exception of Working For Families, little has been done to boost funding for health, housing, education and welfare, nor substantially reduce socio-economic inequality, unemployment, carbon emissions, and the tax paid by low and middle income earners.⁷⁹ This continuation of the neoliberal policy regime has led to a substantial minority of voters supporting parties to the left of Labour. But it has also created fertile terrain for elements of the far right to appeal those experiencing deprivation caused by capitalism and four decades of neoliberal policies. They do so by blaming mainstream politicians and scapegoating immigrants, refugees, ethnic minorities, rainbow communities, academics, public officials, and so forth. As Callinicos observes, ‘the far right has thus succeeded in directing anger generated by the ills of the neoliberal era, at least in certain sections of the population, on the one hand, onto a cosmopolitan elite and, on the other, onto immigrants and refugees’.⁸⁰

The Government’s COVID-19 strategy should not be exaggerated as a causal factor contributing to Labour’s defeat in election 2023. Several other factors were more significant, such as the surge of inflation and associated cost-of-living crisis in the early 2020s, caused by rising oil prices, corporations increasing profit margins in the wake of COVID-19, and

77 See, for example, Callinicos, *The New Age*, 118–148; William Davies, ‘The New Neoliberalism’, *New Left Review* 2/101 (2016), 1–11.

78 Renton, *The New Authoritarians*, 230–232.

79 Brian Roper, *Prosperity for All? Economic, Social and Political Change in New Zealand since 1935* (Cengage, 2005); Roper, ‘Making Sense of Neoliberalism’.

80 Callinicos, *The New Age*, 124.

supply chain disruptions. The Reserve Bank responded with monetarist disinflationary monetary policy settings in a manner that bears a close resemblance to the monetary policy settings of the period from 1984 to 1993.⁸¹ In simple terms, this response drove up interest rates, sending the economy into a policy-engineered recession, using the resulting rising rate of unemployment to exert downward pressure on wages and prices. In 2022, Reserve Bank Governor, Adrian Orr, described this response as ‘our tried and trusted monetary policy approach’ that would act to ‘ensure inflation heads back to within our 1-3 percent per annum target range’.⁸²

Sue Bradford, Jack Foster, and Metiria Turei argue that the ‘cost-of-living crisis’ didn’t exist in reality, for the most part, and was essentially conjured up by National Party propagandists to win the election and justify its punitive neoliberal policy agenda.⁸³ Clearly the manner in which the National Party used the notion of a cost-of-living crisis was profoundly ideological and designed to serve its own political purposes. It glosses over the real causes of the cost-of-living crisis, not least of which are the long-term distributive impacts of neoliberal policies, and the short-term impacts of the real drivers of the inflationary surge and the Reserve Bank’s monetarist response. As we are currently witnessing, the Sixth National Government’s neoliberal programme of fiscal austerity is making things worse rather than better for the majority of New Zealanders who are on low- and middle- incomes.

There is much here that we can warmly agree upon. Bradford, Foster, and Turei correctly observe that the cost-of-living crisis impacted most severely on low income-earners and those servicing large mortgages. I am more troubled by their accompanying observation that ‘those on higher [than low] incomes and without crippling levels of mortgage have been

81 See Jan Whitwell, ‘The Rogernomics Monetarist Experiment’, in *The Fourth Labour Government: Politics and Policy in New Zealand*, eds. Jonathon Boston and Martin Holland, 2nd edn. (Oxford University Press, 1990), chapter 6.

82 Adrian Orr, ‘Tackling Inflation During a Pandemic’, Speech, Waikato University NZ Economics Forum, University of Waikato, 25 February, 2022.

83 Sue Bradford, Jack Foster and Metiria Turei, ‘A Punitive Turn’, *Counterfutures* 15, 10–11.

able to absorb the impact of rising prices more comfortably'.⁸⁴ This line of argument raises several issues that cannot be addressed fully here. A few brief remarks will have to suffice. According to Statistics NZ the CPI inflation rate increases at a significantly higher rate than average hourly earnings from the June 2021 to September 2022 quarters.⁸⁵ Although the annual percentage increase of nominal hourly wages is slightly above the rate of CPI inflation for most quarters in 2023, accordingly to the Quarterly Economic Survey, the overall effect is a decline in real wages from June 2021 to September 2023.⁸⁶ And these numbers are referring to hourly earnings which differs from income. Increasing unemployment and under-employment, combined with declining overtime, can negatively impact the real incomes of working-class households to a greater extent than is captured by this measure. The official unemployment rate increased from 3.3 percent in the September quarter 2022 to 4.0 percent in the December quarter 2023. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that a majority of wage earners experienced declines in real incomes in the two years leading up to election 2023.

A related point of vital importance is that available data on income inequality since the early 1980s consistently shows that income inequalities are greater after housing costs (AHC) have been taken-into-account than before housing costs (BHC).⁸⁷ This development suggests that a sharp rise of AHC income inequality is likely to have occurred from March 2021 to September 2023. One of the reasons for this rise is that those on low and middle incomes typically pay a higher proportion of their incomes on mortgage repayments and rent than those on high incomes.⁸⁸ Furthermore, roughly 70 percent of New Zealand households have to live off incomes

84 Bradford, Foster, and Turei, 'A Punitive Turn', 10.

85 Statistics New Zealand, 'Average Hourly Earnings Up 5.2 percent Annually', Stats NZ (website), accessed 7 July, 2025.

86 Statistics New Zealand, 'Consumers Price Index (CPI)', Stats NZ (website), accessed 7 July, 2025.

87 Bryan Perry, 'Household Incomes in New Zealand: Trends in Indicators of Inequality and Hardship 1982 to 2018', Ministry of Social Development (November 2019), 12–13, 72, 75–106.

88 Perry, 'Household Incomes', 72.

that require careful household budgeting to make ends meet. For example, according to Statistics NZ, average annual household equivalised disposable income, after housing costs were deducted, amounted to \$44,142 in 2023.⁸⁹ From June 2022 to June 2023 ‘average weekly expenditure on total mortgage payments increased from \$475.00 to \$605.60 [up 27.5 percent]’.⁹⁰ During the same period average rents ‘increased from \$410.70 to \$427.20 [up 4.0 percent]’. 36.1 percent of households perceived their income as either ‘not enough’ or ‘only just enough’ (up 3.7 percentage points).⁹¹ Annual food price inflation increased substantially from 0.5 percent in March 2021 to 12.5 percent in July 2023.⁹²

In short, the evidence indicates that an increasing proportion of households, and especially households populated by workers, Māori, Pasifika, beneficiaries, and students, experienced increasing socio-economic pressure and pain in the two years prior to the 2023 election. This socio-economic pain was further exacerbated by a decline of the average house price in 2023. The cost-of-living crisis was therefore real, extensive, and a major factor contributing to Labour losing the 2023 election. There is thus little convincing evidence supporting Bradford, Foster, and Turei’s view that ‘Labour uncritically adopted the idea that the New Zealand economy was in the grips of a crisis. Those to the left of Labour followed suit. Thus, the election was played out on the terrain of National’s choosing – another common theme of parliamentary politics in the neoliberal era’.⁹³ It’s hard to see how denying the abundantly obvious fact that a majority of New Zealand households were experiencing substantial declines in their real disposable AHC incomes from 2021 to 2023 would have improved Labour’s prospects for being re-elected. Nonetheless it certainly is true that because of its fundamental acceptance of neoliberalism and the Reserve Bank’s monetarist

89 Statistics New Zealand, ‘Household Income and Housing-Cost Statistics: Year Ended June 2023’, Stats NZ (website), accessed 7 July, 2025.

90 Statistics New Zealand, ‘Household Income’.

91 Statistics New Zealand, ‘Household Income’.

92 Statistics New Zealand, ‘Annual Food Price Inflation’, Stats NZ (website), accessed 7 July, 2025.

93 Bradford, Foster, and Turei, ‘A Punitive Turn’, 11.

disinflationary monetary policy settings, ‘Labour was unable to develop an alternative politics of the inflationary moment’.⁹⁴

I strongly agree that Labour’s ideology is best depicted as ‘a zombified Third Way’, much closer politically to Tony Blair, Helen Clark, and Keir Starmer than to Jeremy Corbyn, Bernie Sanders, or Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Labour’s electoral strategy under Chris Hipkins’ leadership appeared to be firmly focused on trying to retain the support of voters who had shifted from National to Labour in 2020. This interpretation is confirmed by Hipkin’s retrospective consideration of Labour 2023 election campaign, where he states that ‘New Zealanders wanted the pandemic to be over, the cost-of-living crisis to be over, and the pace of change to slow’.⁹⁵ Accordingly, he

made the decision that our narrow route to victory involved a realistic set of manifesto commitments predominately focused on the issues that were in front of mind for voters – the cost-of-living crisis and issues like crime. I also decided quite consciously that rhetoric around transformation wasn’t going to resonate in 2023 in the way that it had in 2017 and 2020, and that the public were looking for stability rather than more radical transformation.⁹⁶

This approach is, indeed, entirely consistent with a zombified Third Way social democracy that, if maintained in its current form, will reduce Labour’s chances of being elected in 2026. The British Labour Party, led by Keir Starmer, appears to be the model that Hipkins wishes to replicate with his leadership of the New Zealand Labour Party, ignoring, among other things, the fact that Labour in the UK received fewer votes in the 2024 election (9.7 million) than it did in the 2017 (12.9 million) and 2019 (10.3 million) elections when Jeremy Corbyn was the leader and the party campaigned on the basis of its ‘we are many, they are few’ manifesto.⁹⁷

94 Bradford, Foster, and Turei, ‘A Punitive Turn’, 11.

95 Chris Hipkins, ‘Labour: The Leader’s Perspective’, in *Politics in a Pandemic*, 95.

96 Hipkins, ‘The Leader’s Perspective’.

97 UK Parliament, ‘UK Parliament Election Results’, accessed 7 July, 2025.

It was precisely Labour's failure to be genuinely transformative across a broad array of different policy areas, such as climate change, employment relations, housing, macroeconomic management, tertiary education, socio-economic disparities between Pākehā, Māori and Pasifika, and most importantly of all, taxation, that led to it losing so much support to the Greens and Te Pāti Māori.

Nonetheless, the importance of the policy failings of the Sixth Labour Government and the political ineptitude of its 2023 election campaign should not be over-emphasised as factors contributing to the electoral victory of National, ACT, and NZ First. Afterall, although the Fifth Labour Government may have had a clearer and more convincing political articulation of Third Way social democracy than the Sixth Labour Government, the former was even more politically conservative. In part, the Fifth Labour Government held onto power for nine years because National gifted Labour a third term with its disastrous decision to appoint Don Brash as its leader for the 2005 election campaign.

Of much greater significance is the second major factor that contributed to National winning the 2023 election. This can be summed up in a word: money. Lots of money (see Table 1). There are several points to note in relation to the figures in this table. Firstly, although the centre-right parties historically have tended to obtain more funding for their election campaigns than the parties of the left, the sheer scale of the funding for National, ACT, and NZ First is historically unprecedented. These parties received combined declared donations of \$24,038,015 in 2022 and 2023. Secondly, the disparity of combined party funding is much larger in 2022 than in 2023: \$7.5 million versus \$829,352, meaning that the centre-right parties received 9.06 times more funding than the centre-left parties. National, ACT and NZ First, in effect, began their 2023 election campaigns in 2022. 'The money helped', a National Party source said. They continued: 'We all forget what 18 months ago was like. No staff, no money, and taking on an in-fighting National Party. The turnaround really is extraordinary in that period of time'.⁹⁸

98 Andrea Vance, "Minds, not hearts". How the National Party Won the Biggest Swing in Election History', *The Post*, 22 October, 2023.

Party	2022	2023	2022 + 2023
ACT	\$2,081,331	\$4,262,713	\$6,344,044
National	\$5,116,036	\$10,383,230	\$15,499,266
NZ First	\$317,288	\$1,877,417	\$2,194,705
Labour	\$419,365	\$4,769,395	\$5,188,760
Greens	\$413,360	\$3,314,651	\$3,728,011
Te Pāti Māori	\$36,626	\$160,750	\$197,376
ACT, Nats, NZ First	\$7,514,655	\$16,523,360	\$24,038,015
Lab, Greens, Māori	\$829,352	\$8,244,796	\$9,074,148

Table 1: Party Donations and Loans. Source: NZ Electoral Commission.

The upshot is that while surging inflation, rising interest rates and mortgage repayments, falling house prices, soaring food prices, and anti-vax protests contributed to a fall of support for Labour and rising support for ACT, NZ First and National, the unprecedented volume of money flowing to the centre-right parties was crucially important in enabling them to run effective election campaigns. In effect, from the beginning of 2021 to the 2023 election, Labour was hit by a double-whammy consisting of adverse changes in socio-economic conditions and business, farmers, and high-income earners donating a huge amount of money to National, ACT, and NZ First. The role played by large-scale donations to the campaign funds of ACT, National, and NZ First highlights the importance of pushing for much tighter regulation in this area, including banning corporate funding of political parties and placing strict limits on the maximum amount that any individual can donate to a political party.

There is possibly little that Labour could have done to prevent the resulting shifts in support to both its left (Greens, Te Pāti Māori) and its right, but the Hipkins-led retreat from ‘transformative’ policies didn’t help. Among other things, it is likely that Labour would have retained more electoral support if it had committed to progressive taxation reform, with

major tax increases for the rich (on capital gains, financial transactions, wealth, high incomes, and inheritance) used to fund tax cuts for low- and middle-income earners (for example, introducing a tax-free bracket at the bottom of the income tax scales, inflation-adjusting income tax thresholds, removing GST from food and other essentials, and so forth). Among other things, Labour should have recommitted to its fees-free policy for tertiary education, boosted funding for tertiary education generally, promised more meaningful action on climate change, committed to eliminating extensive restrictions on the right to strike and free-riding on the benefits of union membership, more forcefully defended its fundamentally sound Three Waters reforms, promised to break up the supermarket duopoly, renationalise electricity generation and retailing, dumped its ineffective neoliberal public housing policies, and addressed years of cumulative underfunding of the public health system. But instead of progressive policies like these, Labour's zombified Third Way social democracy offered little real change nor appeal to the 676,000 voters who abandoned Labour for other political parties in the 2023 election.⁹⁹

There is a substantial chance that the Sixth National Government may be the first single-term National government in New Zealand's political history. Although it has money, media, a related capacity to manipulate social media, and Labour's zombified third way in its favour, there are factors counting against it. The current National-led Government is polling much lower than it achieved during the first two years of the Fifth National Government. Another factor is the contrast between the fiscal stimulus at the heart of the Key-English Government's response to the GFC with the fiscal austerity implemented by the current Government, alongside the popularity of John Key versus the unpopularity of Chris Luxon. We can also include the mass protests in opposition to some of the Sixth National Government's policies (e.g. Treaty Principles Bill; cuts to the new Dunedin hospital project, etc), the depth of the recession and continuation of high levels of unemployment during its first term, the likelihood that interest rates and a weak housing market will remain issues for voters in 2026, and

99 Bradford, Foster, and Turei, 'A Punitive Turn', 11.

the unpopularity of the Government's poor management of the replacement of aging and unreliable Cook Strait ferries. National remains more likely than Labour to be able to form a government after the 2026 election, but the odds are only narrowly in its favour.

Contemporary Relevance and Future Implications

The pandemic is likely to remain politically significant for years to come. Centre-right and far-right politicians, business lobby groups, neoliberal think-tanks, and right-wing intellectuals are revising the history of the pandemic to criticise the performance of centre-left governments and justify their preference for policies that prioritise short-term profits ahead of positive public health outcomes. We can expect much greater right-wing political resistance to effective public health measures when the next pandemic breaks out. Related to these trends, the Sixth National Government is actively diminishing the real and continuing negative health impacts of SARS-CoV-2. These negative health impacts do not occur in egalitarian patterns and trends across populations but, as with so many other health conditions, are intimately related to, and shaped by, inequalities of class, gender, ethnicity, disability, and age. The global spread and impact of the pandemic was also shaped by the large disparities between countries in the Global North and South. COVID-19 is thus forming part of the complex dialectical interaction of the causes of health and social inequalities. Health inequalities are often, in large part, caused by social inequalities which, in turn, are exacerbated by the prevalence of health problems amongst the relatively disadvantaged.

The COVID-19 pandemic should not be viewed as a 'once in 100 years' event. The factors that caused this pandemic are likely to cause another, which may be substantially more deadly, much sooner than that. In an interesting recent interview, Ashley Bloomfield, former Director-General of Health, said that he wasn't a 'sensationalist' but made it clear that he believes the world faces another pandemic like COVID-19 within the near future. 'If we've got five years before the next pandemic, I would take it',

he concluded.¹⁰⁰ Hence the COVID-19 pandemic should be taken as a warning that a more contagious and deadly viral infection could emerge in the future. As Wallace convincingly argues, ‘in the name of the populace they claim to serve, companies and governments alike are willing and able to risk the very end of humanity as we know it’.¹⁰¹

These global conditions underline the importance of being better prepared for the next pandemic. It is crucially important to recognise and defend the effective health policy responses that worked with the COVID-19 pandemic, such as mass testing, contact tracing, isolation, mask wearing, lockdowns, quarantine, rigorous monitoring, and mandatory vaccination. The Sixth Labour Government’s elimination strategy in response to the pandemic, with public health mandates effectively implemented then relaxed once a large majority of the population had been vaccinated, saved thousands of lives and it was one of the best COVID-19 policy responses in the world. It is vitally important to staunchly defend elimination strategies such as this against right-wing detractors.

Of course, being better prepared for the next pandemic also requires critical evaluation of the policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the Sixth Labour Government’s elimination strategy. Although it was ultimately successful it could have been improved in a number of key areas, including working with greater care, sensitivity, humility, openness, and honesty with Māori health care providers and communities, providing better levels and delivery of income support to workers and students during lockdowns, better funding of health care and ensuring greater per-capita provision of ICU beds, developing better advanced planning for the provision of mass quarantine facilities, and maintaining rather abandoning a science-based COVID-19 management strategy.

The left also needs to learn the correct lessons from the successes and failures of its campaigns to counter the far right. As David Renton shows, the bulk of the far right in most countries is non-fascist, with genuinely

100 Paddy Gower, ‘Sir Ashley Bloomfield’s Lockdown Anniversary Warning: Another Pandemic is Coming’, *Stuff*, 25 March, 2025.

101 Wallace, *Big Farms Make Big Flu*, 10–11.

fascist elements generally present but forming minority elements within the far right as a whole.¹⁰² It would be a mistake for those on the left to fail to acknowledge this fact. Nonetheless, it is a bigger mistake to fail to recognise the influence of the far right where it exists, as it undoubtedly did within the anti-mandate protests in 2022, and to accurately identify the presence of fascist elements that used these protests as a platform to promote their ideas. In the absence of an effective counter-mobilisation, anti-mandate protestors, tacitly supported by National, NZ First and ACT, effectively derailed the Sixth Labour Government's science-based policy response to COVID-19 (exemplified by the removal of all mask wearing mandates), leaving us with the Sixth National Government's woefully inadequate policy-making in relation to COVID-19 and other infectious diseases.

Protests such as the 2022 anti-mandate protests need to be directly confronted by mass united counter-mobilisations. There were substantial complexities and challenges facing left activists in February of 2022, not least of which, a desire to comply with public health restrictions in the midst of a wave of Omicron infections and COVID-19 related deaths (2,419 in 2022), unease at the use of state repression to suppress the Wellington occupation, and the fact that some activists were suffering from COVID-19.¹⁰³ Nonetheless, there needed to be stronger counter-protests organised by the left. One of the few legitimate reasons to breach public health mandates in the context of a pandemic is to use any means necessary to counter the far right and smash fascism.

Using any means necessary to smash racism and fascism is different to arguing for the use of any means possible. For example, small scale acts of violence towards fascists should be avoided. Positive examples of the kind of political action required to stop the growth of the far right include the protest against Posie Parker's attempt to voice anti-trans bigotry at Albert Park in Tāmaki Makaurau on 25 March 2023 and the Hikoi mō te Tiriti

102 Renton, *The New Authoritarians*, 1–22, 46–67.

103 Ministry of Health, 'COVID-19 Trends and Insights: Executive Summary', 29 March, 2023.

protests against ACT's *Treaty Principles Bill* in November 2024. Indeed, these are inspiring examples of the kind of mass mobilisation required to effectively counter the racist ideas and pernicious policies of the far right. In addition to mass counter-mobilisation aimed at preventing fascists from building their movement by taking over the streets through marches, staging rallies, and organising public meetings, there are other important ways of countering the far right. To develop effective anti-far right political responses, the left needs to address the real concerns of those who are being drawn in by far-right populism, such as disgruntlement with neoliberal policies, inadequate provision of social services, public housing, and health care, and so forth. In this vein, it is important to identify real causes of social problems and offer positive progressive solutions and alternatives to neoliberal policies. Obvious examples include progressive taxation reform to facilitate better funding of health, education, housing, welfare, and climate change responses. Winning the culture war in areas such as music (for example, Rock Against Racism and Love Music Hate Racism in the UK), social media, art, film, television, YouTube videos, sport, and fashion is also important.

The left needs to be bigger, better organised, and more powerful than it is currently to counter the rise of the far right and to ensure that the valuable lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic are not lost. The history of past struggles and campaigns, from the 'long 1970s' to the present, shows that socialist organisations with healthy politics and a non-sectarian preparedness to work with other groups and political forces, such as the International Socialist Organisation, can exert a positive influence out of proportion to the size of their membership. As the far right grows and becomes better organised, building socialist organisations become an increasingly important and urgent task.

Finally, how we analyse, explain, and critically evaluate the pandemic has considerable intellectual significance. We need to better understand the role that it played in the polycrisis that has continued to intensify since the GFC. Collectively navigating this terrain in an emancipatory direction requires continuing critical analysis, new thinking, and solidaristic activist

organising, campaigning, and mobilising. The left has major advantages in countering the far right's politics of hate, with politics of empathy, love, and hope for a better future. These advantages include greater coherence and realism, stronger support amongst students, workers, Māori, women, rainbow communities, and migrant communities, and ideas, politics, and policies that are in reality more consistent with the actual interests and concerns of the aforementioned. We need to collectively make a better future because if we fail to do so, the far right will make a future that is much worse.