

New Zealand pro-Palestine protester ends 19-day hunger strike

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A New Zealand pro-Palestine activist last week ended a 19-day hunger strike. Will Alexander, a teacher and former actor in the popular TV show “Shortland Street,” said in a statement on June 4 that he had been contacted by supporters in Palestine: “Enough people have lost their lives... As my health is being affected, they are asking me to stop.”

Alexander told the *Spinoff* he had been feeling shaky and dizzy since day four of his zero-calorie diet and by last week had lost 12 kilograms. He was advised that even a relatively healthy hunger striker can be at risk of dying after three weeks.

Alexander, who is part of the Palestinian Solidarity Network Aotearoa (PSNA), began his strike saying: “I can no longer stand by while my own government is complicit in an on-going genocide committed by Israel against the Palestinian people. Innocent children are being killed in the thousands. Israel has violated international law for decades with full impunity granted by Western governments like New Zealand.”

At a rally in Christchurch on May 18 he pledged to continue fasting until the government stopped supporting the genocide in Gaza. He made three demands of the National Party-led government: withdraw NZ troops from the Red Sea, stop NZ-based company Rakon from supplying components for weapons used by Israel, and resume and then double humanitarian funding for UNRWA.

The hunger strike was not Alexander’s first individual protest. In February, he walked 600km from Christchurch to the Israeli embassy in Wellington as a fundraiser for the UNICEF Children of Gaza Crisis Project, carrying a backpack and waving a Palestinian flag. He raised nearly \$4,000 in 11 weeks but said he wanted to “do more.”

He attended weekly rallies in Christchurch and joined

the PSNA but said: “I love the rallies and the actions that people are doing—but if it doesn’t put pressure on the government, then it’s not making much of a difference.” Yet Alexander’s campaigns of individual protest put no “pressure” on the authorities whatsoever.

After he was granted a meeting in Wellington last month with Foreign Minister Winston Peters and senior officials, Alexander told Radio NZ: “I feel as though they did a lot of nodding and smiling and writing things down, however, I don’t know whether it will have made any difference or whether the message will have got through.”

Prime Minister Christopher Luxon was also dismissive, falsely claiming his government had “done the right thing” regarding the Israel-Gaza war. “I think that’s a real shame that he [Alexander] feels that’s his course of action because I am actually very proud of the New Zealand government’s response,” he told the AM TV show.

Luxon bluntly refused to directly address Alexander’s demands. He stated that the government had called for a “ceasefire” and for “peace and stability in the region”—calls that are just as empty and cynical as those being made by the Biden administration. The New Zealand government endorsed Israel’s assault on Gaza and provides ongoing practical support for Israel’s war machine and US imperialism.

Alexander’s hunger strike was widely promoted within the protest movement and even in the corporate media. While he urged others not to follow his example, it is hardly surprising that this is what happened. On June 2, 17-year-old Kerikeri high school student Wren Fisher started her own hunger strike. She told the *Northern Advocate* that she wanted to protect basic human rights in Gaza “where more than two million people are starving.” Fortunately, Fisher ended

her hunger strike after Alexander ended his.

Alexander has claimed success, saying his hunger strike “was never aiming to fix every problem. It has been about putting pressure on the Government to act.” He continued: “They... will continue to feel that pressure as we engage in new actions designed to keep the heat on the Government.”

This is entirely false. Alexander’s appeals to the New Zealand government have shown that individual protests—including in the extreme form of a hunger strike—will not change the minds of the war criminals. The Biden administration and its counterparts, including in New Zealand, have demonstrated for the last eight months that they are impervious to public opinion.

The hunger strike was a political dead-end, which in fact diverted attention from what actually needs to be done to stop the expanding imperialist-backed slaughter—not just in Gaza but also in the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and the US-led militarisation of the Indo-Pacific region that is leading to war with China.

Alexander toured parts of the country and was promoted online and at pro-Palestine events by the PSNA and its leader, prominent activist John Minto, who has a long history in middle class and capitalist politics, including as a Unite union official and a candidate for the Maori nationalist Mana Party in the 2011 and 2014 elections.

The PSNA’s perspective is to endlessly appeal to parliamentarians, through petitions and letter-writing campaigns, and calls for boycotts and divestment from Israel. Minto and other organisers have repeatedly invited MPs from the opposition Labour Party and its allies, the Greens and Te P?ti M?ori, to address protest rallies, despite being fully aware that the previous Labour-Greens government strengthened New Zealand’s alliance with US imperialism—including by sending NZ troops to Britain to train Ukrainian conscripts to fight against Russia.

Despite overwhelming public support for the Palestinians and outrage at Israel’s genocidal actions, there is growing frustration that the protests are not working, reflected in Alexander’s own decision to go on a hunger strike. He clearly believed that more drastic action was needed. Notwithstanding his sincerity and willingness to sacrifice his own health, however, this

was another reflection of the crisis of political perspective in the protest movement.

In his recent book, *The Logic of Zionism: From Nationalist Myth to the Gaza Genocide*, David North opposes those pseudo-left figures, such as Cornel West and Chris Hedges, who glorified the tragic death of Aaron Bushnell, who committed suicide outside the Israeli embassy in Washington in February to protest the genocide. North writes:

“What is required to put an end to [the genocide]? Not individual acts of vengeance, not personal acts of self-sacrifice, but a turn to the only social force which actually has in its power, in its objective role in the whole process of capitalist production, in its position in the forces of production, its potential economic strength, its global character, the ability to bring capitalism to its knees, to destroy the very foundations of militarism.”

He urges young people: “transform your anger and outrage into effective political action, into the determination to master Marxist theory, to learn the lessons of history, to acquaint yourself with the great revolutionary struggles of the last century.”

These points apply just as forcefully to the case of Will Alexander and his supporters. The middle-class organisations and activists that currently dominate the pro-Palestine movement are counterposing the protest of the individual martyr to the building of a politically conscious mass movement of the working class that is the only way to put an end to imperialist barbarism and the capitalist system upon which it is based.

The anti-war movement can only move forward to the extent that the working class takes its own action, in opposition to Labour and the entire capitalist political establishment, including the trade union apparatus and the pseudo-left organisations that promote it.



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