

Combat Safetyism

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Abstract: In a context of rising global fascism, Aotearoa/New Zealand has seen an emboldened far-right, led by the anti-queer Destiny Church. Writing as a collective of queer and trans scholars and activists, this article explores two case studies of anti-fascist organising, in response to Destiny Church's attacks on queer communities and symbols in 2024 and 2025. It proposes a theory of anti-fascism based on mass politics. It analyses a barrier to this mass politics: safetyism. Safetyism refers to a politics that prioritises the immediate safety of protesters over the struggle for liberation and against fascism. The first case study, an attempted National Day of Action in 2024, was ultimately undone by safetyist logics. The article draws the key lessons from these experiences, including how time, structure and attempts at consensus can facilitate safetyist arguments. In the second case study, the article analyses how a different approach was taken to organise 'Defying Destiny'. This approach attempted to pre-empt safetyism by relying on strong pre-existing relationships and organisational forms. Ultimately, the article contends that we need to combat safetyism, to build the anti-fascist movement to meet our current moment.

Keywords: anti-fascism; queer politics; social movements; safetyism; New Zealand politics

Around the world, the forces of the far-right continue to organise and mobilise. This year, Alternative for Germany (AfD) won the highest electoral representation for the German far-right since Adolf Hitler (Yussuf, 2025). Under the Trump presidency, the executive branch of the American government has ruled by decree, ramping up the securitisation of the United States borders and deporting migrants to concentration camps in Guantanamo Bay (Dickson et al., 2025). In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the coalition government relies on stoking racist resentment to build its base of support. In February 2025, outgoing Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters launched a blistering verbal attack on Green Party MP Ricardo Menéndez March, which was so racist that he was obliged to backtrack (RNZ News, 2025). Incoming Deputy Prime Minister David Seymour has overseen the tabling of the Treaty Principles Bill, which seeks to unilaterally change the Crown's responsibilities to Māori under the 1840 Tiriti o Waitangi (ActionStation Aotearoa, 2025). An axis has formed between the right-wing parliamentary parties, the internet-poisoned pseudo-populists, and the blood-and-soil neo-Nazis (Dutta, 2023; Open Measures, 2022). Fascism has become generalised abroad, as well as in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

One fascist formation of relevance is Destiny Church, a Pentecostal evangelist movement with a base made up primarily of sub-proletarian Māori and Pacific peoples. Destiny Church uses its front groups like Man Up and Legacy to provide social services, funnelling vulnerable people from prisons, courts and mental health services directly to Destiny Church for radicalisation (Johnston, 2025). Destiny Church's Christo-fascist politics are not new, but have recently escalated, targeting Rainbow Pride events and locations associated with the queer community (Franks, 2025a, 2025b; New Zealand Herald, 2025; New Zealand Press Association, 2004; RNZ News, 2024a). Working as the vanguard of the fascist right, Destiny

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Church is ramping up its use of political violence against queer people, progressing from symbolic protests to disruptive direct action, property destruction and targeted homophobic assaults. The purpose of this strategy is to drive queer people out of public life, making us afraid enough of the possibility of violence that we willingly return to the closet.

To stymie the rise of fascism, we need bold mass action. However, safetyism, a problematic response to fascism from the liberal left, stands in the way of this action. Safetyism is concerned with the immediate safety of individual protesters, at the expense of the long-term safety of marginalised groups. Writing as a collective of queer and trans scholars and activists, this article reflects on how safetyism played out in response to Destiny Church's homo- and transphobic actions in 2024 and stood in the way of a National Day of Action in solidarity with queer people. As co-organisers of that action, we learned from this experience and, as a result, organised a much stronger response to Destiny Church's 2025 anti-queer actions in the form of a mass mobilisation. As such, this article outlines what safetyism is and how we must overcome it to face the threat of fascism.

Anti-fascism or safetyism?

We do not have to simply accept the inevitability of the rise of a homo- and transphobic global fascist movement. However, some of the prevailing approaches to anti-fascist politics have been defined by either requests for state and corporate actors to protect marginalised groups, or inaction. Neither of these strategies is sufficient.

On the one hand, we cannot rely on the capitalist state to police its way out of fascism. In practice, when more policing powers or hate crime legislation have been enacted, they have resulted in the targeting of Māori (Bingham et al., 2020), as well as left-wing organisers, such as environmentalists and Palestine solidarity activists, not the far-right (Argue, 2025; Civicus Monitor, 2024; New Zealand Council for Civil Liberties, 2025). Capitalist enterprises are also unreliable allies, as we have seen how capitalists have rolled back their tokenistic support when it was politically, and financially, prudent. This includes Meta, Walmart and McDonalds scaling back or ending their Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policies, following the election of Donald Trump (Hildesley, 2025; Kearins, 2025). On the other hand, inaction is also clearly unviable. We cannot ignore fascism and hope that it will simply go away. The ongoing and looming crises we face provide the social and economic context for fascist ascendancy. While we urgently need to address these crises, we also need to respond to the specific threat posed by currently existing fascist movements.

We argue that the best response to fascism, in our current circumstances,¹ is mass mobilisation. By this, we mean gathering a broad group of people who are willing to stand in solidarity with one another and against fascism. This needs to be in person, to demonstrate popular support through numbers, and cut through the filters of capitalist media. This tactic has two main benefits. First, it demonstrates to fascists, but also to the attendees and the broader public, that fascists are detested and that, as a society, we reject them. When done well, this tactic sends a message to fascists that we are many and they are few. It improves public safety against fascists with the implicit threat that fascists are outnumbered. When the opposite is true, and fascists feel that they can outnumber their opponents in public, their willingness to use more extreme violence to silence us may escalate. Indeed, the real risk in failing to demonstrate public, mass refusal of fascism is that fascist forces may be further emboldened.

Second, in the case of a mobilisation supporting a marginalised or oppressed group, such as queer people, this tactic can build solidarity and demonstrate that the group is loved and supported. While wonderful, such mobilisation achieves more than just individual-level feelings of support. Where an

¹ Importantly, as our circumstances change, our responses to fascism may need to change as well.

intended consequence of fascist intimidation is for queer people to shrink into the shadows, demonstrations of mass solidarity declare that queers have safety in numbers. The risks of failing to show up, however, are grave. When we are out of public life, hidden in dark corners, our issues are easier to ignore and our dignity easier to trample upon. It is a matter of our ongoing safety that marginalised groups continue to be able to demonstrate loudly and provocatively for our rights.

The emergence of safetyism, as a response to anti-fascist organising in Aotearoa/New Zealand is, therefore, a great irony. *Safetyism* refers to the “prioritisation of ‘safety’ over struggle” (Rākete & Lamusse, 2024, p. 12). In practice, as we discuss below, safetyism means arguing for the abandonment of protest against the far-right, as doing so may place protesters at risk of danger. It is a short-term approach to safety, where fears for immediate safety, however genuine, trump the importance of demonstrating people power.

While this approach may provide short-term safety for those unwilling to protest, it undermines the safety of people who do turn up. By discouraging attendance of anti-fascist protests, safetyists contribute to a reduction in the number of attendees, diminishing the power of the mass mobilisation. At worst, it could result in a genuine threat to safety: fascist (counter-)protesters outnumbering anti-fascists.

However, the longer-term implications of safetyism are particularly concerning. When we fail to demonstrate in greater numbers that fascism is unacceptable and that we stand in solidarity with marginalised groups, we cede power to fascists. Where safetyism leads to the abandonment of anti-fascist mass action, it aids the growth of fascism. Indeed, fascism wins the day the safetyist convinces queer people that they cannot safely demonstrate in public. In the rest of this article, we discuss how safetyism has operated in Aotearoa/New Zealand recently, using recent two case studies.

National Day of Action

In March 2024, there was a series of attacks on queer events and public symbols representing queer people. When Destiny Church’s leader Brian Tamaki pledged to forcibly shut down Rainbow Storytimes at libraries in Rotorua and Hastings, the events were cancelled over public safety concerns (RNZ News, 2024a; Smith, 2024). At a trans cartoonist event at Christchurch’s Tūranga Library, a group of fascists—some wearing skull masks—marched around the children’s area shouting transphobic obscenities into a speaker (Morgan, 2024). On 26 March, members of Destiny Church painted Gisborne’s rainbow crossing white, before clashing with counter-protesters outside Rainbow Storytime at Gisborne Library (Green & McCaull, 2024). Two days later, a Destiny Church member attempted to white out the rainbow crossing on Karangahape Road in Tāmaki Makaurau (RNZ News, 2024b). These acts came only months after New Zealand First promised to enact multiple pieces of anti-transgender legislation in their 2023 coalition agreement with the National Party (Bull, 2024; Williams, 2024), and followed arson attacks on queer art space Gloria of Greymouth (Harcourt, 2022) and the Rainbow Youth/Gender Dynamix offices in Tauranga (Houpt, 2022).

Most of the queer friends, co-workers and comrades we spoke to in March 2024 shared feeling a mixture of fear, defeat and deflation. In the face of this dread, two of the authors (Ti and Will) decided to organise a response. We started by calling respected leaders in queer communities, alongside experienced comrades outside of it. From these early calls, alongside our analysis of the situation, we decided that, in two weeks, we would hold a National Day of Action in solidarity with Rainbow communities. The idea behind the day of action was twofold: to demonstrate the support that queer people have across the country, and to show that Destiny Church is a small minority of bigots.

Planning for the action included contacting every public-facing queer, trans and intersex organisation in the country, including non-governmental organisations, union Rainbow networks, and existing activist groups. We wanted to get a broad range of groups together, to show a united front against homo- and transphobic hatred. We hoped to hold events across Aotearoa/New Zealand but kept plans loose to give space for the various groups to discuss what kinds of actions they felt were appropriate.

Forty-eight people representing 30 organisations and hailing from across the motu—Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, Rotorua, Heretaunga/Hastings, Tūranganui-a-Kiwa/Gisborne, Te Papa-i-Oea/Palmerston North, Paekākāriki, Pōneke/Wellington, Ōtautahi/Christchurch, Ōtepoti/Dunedin, Wānaka and elsewhere—gathered for our first online hui on 31 March. At the hui, we spent a considerable amount of time doing whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building) and outlining our kaupapa (founding principles), which included engaging in peaceful protest. A consensus was reached to avoid direct actions in favour of peaceful, joyful actions that would hopefully turn out more people and, thus, aid our goal of demonstrating collective power. We ended that meeting agreeing to go ahead with a National Day of Action, but also to delay it for one week to 21 April. Unfortunately, the organisers were unaware that a safetyist faction had formed during the meeting, which would ultimately become its undoing.

In the next week, people met around the country to start planning local demonstrations. These included plans for picnics, street parties and drag story times in local parks. At the same time, members of the safetyist faction met and prepared to undermine the action. The lead organisers became aware of the faction the day before the next national hui and spoke on the phone with them about their grievances. A member of the faction expressed concern that people wanted to engage in violent action, something that had been clearly decided against. As a show of good faith, the faction was given the chance to speak at the start of the next national meeting on 6 April. We hoped that the faction would be reassured that, in fact, no one planned to engage in any violent action.

Instead, the safetyist faction argued that the entire National Day of Action was putting queer and trans people at risk of further violence. Rather than make the argument against the use of violence, they made an argument against any kind of action: if no one could guarantee the safety of all the participants, the demonstrations should not go ahead. Even worse, if people held a demonstration in Tāmaki Makaurau or Pōneke, where safety in numbers was more likely, the faction argued that queer and trans people in small towns would be put at risk as a result. Moreover, the faction contended that, if the action were to be truly national and reach consensus, CEOs and those on official boards should lead decision-making, not activists, indicating an understanding of queer politics grounded in neoliberal capitalist governance.

This safetyist argument was also bound up in a cynical use of identity politics. The faction claimed to speak on behalf of all People of Colour and that it would be People of Colour who would be ‘unsafe’ if the events went ahead. This was a profoundly unprincipled and logically incoherent argument, as the people they were arguing against were largely Māori and other People of Colour. Furthermore, it disregarded Aotearoa/New Zealand’s history of queer People of Colour being willing to struggle for their liberation, despite the danger they faced. From the brave gay liberationists, led by Ngahuia Te Awakotuku, who marched down Queen Street in Tāmaki Makaurau bearing placards reading, “I’m gay, ask me about it” in 1972, to those activists unafraid to tussle with Salvation Army anti-reform petitioners during the decriminalisation campaign of 1985–1986, queers have long recognised the necessity of protest not despite—but because of—the violence threatened against them (Hansen, 2025, pp. 76, 141). Māori trans sex workers, in particular, have always been at the forefront of queer liberation, positioned as the “face of gayness” for being among the most visible members of queer communities, daring to take up public space (Hansen, 2020, p. 82). Facing regular violence from the police, trans sex workers acted collectively to keep each other safe. For instance, in Pōneke during the 1970s, an informal group known as the Big Teds, strong whakawāhine unafraid to fight back against would-be queer bashers, acted as the protectors of their fellow trans sex workers (Hansen, 2020).

Instead of following the proud history of brave queer and trans rebellion, the safetyist faction won out. The actual plans which had been made for the peaceful events were lost under the hui’s intense debates

over safetyism. Although a significant number of organisers maintained their desire to continue planning the action, the fearmongering and threats of the safetyists made going ahead with plans untenable.

Despite more than a decade of organising in queer, anti-fascist and abolitionist movements, this was the first time we saw safetyism effectively shut down an action. The experience was both frustrating and informative. First, we had to reassess the strategic approach of building a broad coalition quickly. While a broad coalition of groups, some of whom we disagree with, will be necessary to organise an anti-fascist movement to meet our current moment, building a coalition requires trust. At the time, we had not fully accounted for the strong safetyist sentiment, particularly among NGOs, and their existing conflicts with unfunded activist groups. To build a broad coalition, we needed more time. However, time was of the essence. We needed to quickly demonstrate that Destiny Church's actions were not acceptable. This contradiction between a lack of trust and a lack of time meant that the safetyist argument could take hold. Second, because we adopted a broad coalition approach, the lead organisers were cautious about being too prescriptive around what should happen. Rather than coming to the hui with a solid plan, which others would be encouraged to join, there was much more flexibility and openness to other ideas. While this makes sense, in terms of building relationships, getting organiser buy-in and prioritising participatory action, it did not work well for a short time frame. It also created enough uncertainty for liberal safetyists to fearmonger. It was, again, in the contradiction between an open organising strategy and a lack of time, that the strategy was undone.

Defying Destiny

In the months following their first round of attacks, Destiny Church continued preaching hate. In May 2024, an advertisement for a Destiny Church event bore the words “time to kill” above an image of the biblical David carrying the severed head of the giant Goliath, whom Tamaki referred to as a metaphor for “a spirit that wants to sexualise our children” (RNZ News, 2024c). That same month, Tamaki led a protest outside a youth health centre in Christchurch to oppose the alleged dangers of puberty blockers (Matthews, 2024), and spoke at the Inflection Point NZ conference in Pōneke against “gender indoctrination and medicalisation” of children, alongside a string of other transphobes (RNZ News, 2024d).

In February 2025, Destiny Church attacked queer communities with renewed vigour. On 15 February, around 50 Destiny Church members protested outside Te Atatū Library during a drag king's child-friendly science show. They proceeded to storm into the library itself and attempt to enter the private room upstairs where the show was taking place, while blocking all entrances and disrupting a PrideFest Out West dodgeball tournament in the adjourning gymnasium. Library staff, Auckland Pride volunteers, and members of the dodgeball teams valiantly tried to hold off Destiny Church members as they shoved and punched their way upstairs, leaving one of the 16-year-old dodgeball players concussed (New Zealand Herald, 2025). Once in the room, Destiny Church members performed a haka, banged on the wall, and shouted at the 30 adults, toddlers and young children attending (Franks, 2025a). Hours later, more Destiny Church members broke through police barricades at Auckland's Rainbow Parade, halting the parade with another haka (Franks, 2025b). In a social media post that evening, Tamaki wrote: “Let's Make NZ Straight Again! I'm not kidding! Time to clean this country up” (Tamaki, 2025). In a follow-up interview with 1News, Tamaki challenged the prime minister to follow the Trump Administration's declaration that there are only two genders (Tahana, 2025).

This escalation in Destiny Church's use of violence reaffirmed the necessity for a coordinated response. Two days later, a group of organisers in Tāmaki Makaurau, including one of this article's co-authors (Emmy), committed to preparing a public demonstration against Destiny Church, titled “Defying Destiny: Day of Queer Power”. Instead of trying to bring together a broad coalition, the protest was led by People Against Prisons Aotearoa (PAPA). The preparation for the demonstration proceeded extremely

quickly, with only five days passing between the initial meeting and the rally itself. It was able to be organised rapidly because of the already-existing organisational structure and trusting relationships within PAPA. There were organisers responsible for managing relationships with outside organisations and speakers, social media, event security and overall logistics. These unpaid organisers coordinated a much larger base of volunteers and did the work of hosting Defying Destiny. PAPA relied on structured organisational democracy to make all the strategic decisions for Defying Destiny and then drew on its existing relationships to bring others in.

Unlike the attempt at a broad coalition for the National Day of Action, PAPA's existing kaupapa meant that there was significant unity of analysis and a lack of appetite for safetyism. However, safetyist arguments were present in subsequent social media discussions about the rally. Some declared that the event would be unsafe for children, and others that they were too fearful to turn up. By organising, training and uniforming marshals, we pre-empted safetyist arguments against turning up. This fact, when communicated through our organisations to our base in the masses, was effective. The outcome of this organising was around 1200 people turning up to defy Destiny Church. It was a peaceful demonstration of queer joy, with lots of singing and dancing, alongside anti-fascist speeches and chants. As a result, it was not simply a demonstration of anti-fascist queer solidarity, but also a concrete rejection of safetyism.

With Defying Destiny, we recognised that speed is the essence of war (Sun-Tzu, 2022). By mobilising quickly and organising the rally within the space of five days, we pre-empted both the fascists and the safetyists. Unlike the National Day of Action, Defying Destiny was not organised through an effort to gather and seek consensus among a coalition of all possible stakeholders. As the National Day of Action had shown, this would require us to find agreement with those who were critical of mass political action. Instead, Defying Destiny was organised by a self-conscious vanguard. To be a vanguard means not just to decide that one's analysis of the situation is the best, but to take responsibility for providing leadership and direction to the leaderless and directionless masses, demonstrating the correctness of one's analysis through practice (Lenin, 1902). In this context, PAPA acted as a vanguard by reaching a decision that action needed to be taken against Destiny Church and providing a logistical framework for organising that action. With this done, we could invite members of the wider community to participate, reaching out to public speakers, protest marshals and sound technicians, and persuading them to join the struggle. We showed that the vanguard calls the coalition into being. A queer community coalition did not exist when Defying Destiny was called. Nonetheless, when the rally unfolded, this informal coalition was present. While PAPA is unlikely to remain the vanguard of anti-fascist struggle in Aotearoa/New Zealand, this experience demonstrates the necessity of building strong anti-fascist organisations and coalitions that can lead and respond rapidly to fascism, when it rears its ugly head.

Conclusion

As we have argued in this article, safetyism is a serious barrier to the necessary work of mass mobilisation in opposition to fascism. Although we have demonstrated the harm that safetyism has caused to anti-fascist organising, safetyism is not, itself, an entirely illogical position. Indeed, it is admirable to want to keep people safe from the threat of fascism. This is something that both the safetyist and the anti-fascist have in common. However, safetyism's fixation with short-term safety fundamentally undermines the long-term collective safety of marginalised groups.

To those of us who want to beat back fascism, safetyism is supremely frustrating, but Defying Destiny demonstrated that it was possible to pre-empt and push back against this tendency. Indeed, pushing back against this demobilising logic is fundamental to building a mass opposition to fascist threats, not only to queer people but also to our whole society. The two case studies we discussed demonstrate that to move quickly in response to fascism, we need to use our existing organisations to lead the way, as well as build

new ones. Instead of attempting to build a hasty consensus, we need to rely on existing organisations' internal trust between comrades and external relational legitimacy. Building anti-fascist coalitions is still necessary but it is extraordinarily difficult to rapidly cobble together a coalition in response to an immediate crisis. As the struggle continues, and safetyist calls for retreat and submission get louder, we need to stand strong and not cower in the face of fascism.

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