The New Zealand Greens and the war in Afghanistan

By John Braddock
18 February 2002

A week before Christmas, New Zealand's Labour-Alliance government announced that members of its elite SAS soldiers had joined the fighting in Afghanistan. The 30-strong contingent was believed to have been deployed around the Tora Bora area, although Prime Minister Helen Clark refused to comment on the details, citing "security" concerns. Government statements confirmed, however, that the troops, originally offered in September as part of the US-led military operations, had at last been sent. Deputy Prime Minister and Alliance leader Jim Anderton supported the troop deployment, saying that because it "complied with UN resolutions" it was in accord with his party's policy.

Of the political parties in New Zealand, the Greens have emerged as the main parliamentary "opponent" of the Afghanistan war. It was the only party to vote against a resolution in parliament to support the troop deployment and its MPs have been prominent on many anti-war rallies and marches.

However, while moving to position themselves as opponents of the war, the Greens have continued to act as the key prop of the coalition government. They provide essential support to the government by using their seven seats in parliament to give the two coalition parties the crucial votes they need to stay in office. Whatever "differences" the Greens profess to have with the government, their role is fundamentally to keep it in power.

The Greens' opportunist two-handed policy is carried out with a considerable amount of public hand wringing. In a keynote speech given to an "Ecopolitics" conference before Christmas, party leader Jeanette Fitzsimons bemoaned the fact that the Greens' continued support for a government intent on "bombing the desperately poor" was becoming a "serious threat" to their "self-respect". This did not deter Fitzsimons from canvassing the possibility of the Greens formally entering government with Labour after the next elections—due later this year.

The lack of any principled opposition to the war by the Greens is underscored by their silence over the actions of their German counterparts, who have voted to commit troops to an overseas war for the first time since World War II. Having in 1998 rushed to congratulate the German Greens on joining government—and predicting their experience would be a pointer as to "how best to co-operate with Labour in New Zealand"—they have singularly failed to criticise the German party for supporting the war.

The Greens' pacifist posturing serves two related functions. The first is to provide a safety valve to divert growing concern over the war among significant layers of the population back into official channels. They do this by promoting the perspective of "pressuring the government"—while simultaneously serving to buttress it. Secondly, they express the concerns felt in ruling circles over the consequences of unconditional support for the US, and the view that New Zealand's interests may not necessarily coincide with those of the US.

Prime Minister Clark herself has been quick to emphasise New Zealand's own ambitions as a player on the international stage by boasting that, despite its small size and population, it currently has troop deployments in some 13 locations around the globe—mostly under the guise of "peacekeeping" operations. The US military action, however, threatens to destabilise international relations between the imperialist powers, and in New Zealand's case, to undermine its humanitarian pretensions as a "peace" broker.

Responding to the announcement confirming the SAS

troop deployment, Green Party foreign affairs spokesman Keith Locke said New Zealand should never have committed the SAS troops to the war, let alone be seen rushing to join the tail end of the campaign. “Surely this is the time to begin rebuilding Afghanistan with aid, not to continue bombarding it or interfering in its affairs with foreign troops,” he declared. A subsequent release of cabinet papers revealing significant US pressure on New Zealand and other countries to join its “war against terrorism” prompted Locke to assert that “sending troops into a war should not be done on the basis of keeping sweet with the United States”.

However, the Greens’ statements on the war do not at all challenge the aims and character of the war in Afghanistan, which they accept as legitimate. Rather, the party seeks to moderate the unilateral character of the US intervention by seeking to have the war carried out under the auspices of the UN, and thus other major powers, and according to “international law”. According to Fitzsimons, “[T]here may be a place for armed forces ... provided they are mandated by and under the command of the UN”.

The Greens have no trouble supporting imperialist interventions elsewhere. In his main speech to parliament on the SAS decision, Locke drew particular attention to the Greens’ support for the New Zealand military involvement in East Timor. Claiming that “the nation” was “unified in favour” of this operation, he praised it as “consistent with international law, and under the authority of the United Nations”. The Greens, along with the Alliance, were in the forefront of gathering support for UN operations in Timor, where New Zealand’s strategic interests in the region were at stake.

Locke has offered a long list of operations against Libya, Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia and Rwanda which he supported and which he said resulted in “those charged with crimes against humanity” being brought before “the appropriate international courts”. He falsely claimed that the massive military intervention in Serbia and Kosovo, including the extensive bombing campaign by NATO, was essentially a “non-military operation” and thus the “right way” to fight terrorism. “It took time to get Slobodan Milosevic in the dock but he is now there,” he said.

As this record demonstrates, the Greens faithfully defend the interests of New Zealand capitalism. Whatever immediate pretext used to justify military intervention, the underlying motivation of these US-led operations has been to secure key strategic and economic interests, in particular the oil and mineral resources of the Middle East and Central Asia. Any New Zealand involvement has been to maintain its alliances and legitimise its own future interventions in defence of its interests in the Pacific. Far from opposing any of this, the Greens endorse it.

Thus, there has been complete silence from the Green Party on another decision by the government, announced just after Christmas, that a separate contingent of New Zealand troops would join the multi-national occupation force in Kabul. Some 25 Defence Force personnel have been assigned to act alongside their British counterparts in the so-called International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which has received the seal of approval of the UN, and which will pay a key role in propping up the new US-controlled regime in Afghanistan.

The position of the Greens on the Afghanistan simply underscores the character of this international tendency. All of these parties, whether in Germany or New Zealand, defend capitalism, and so represent, in the final analysis, the interests of their “own” national bourgeoisie in whichever country they operate.