

New Zealand's Maori nationalist parties discuss bloc for 2017 election

By John Braddock
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New Zealand's Maori nationalist political parties, Mana and the Maori Party, have begun discussions over co-operating in the 2017 general election. A similar manoeuvre was briefly entertained before the 2014 election, but was sidelined after Mana merged with Internet entrepreneur Kim Dotcom's pro-business Internet Party to form Internet-Mana.

The talks are driven by ambitions within both parties for a more direct role in government, whichever major party wins the next election. The two parties are not at the moment proposing to merge, but to work together. Neither party would have any compunction in imposing the next stage of the austerity agenda demanded by big business.

Maori Party leader Marama Fox told *Waatea News* on July 21 the two parties had "similar" policies and didn't "want to be taking pot shots at each other." Interviewed alongside Mana Party leader Hone Harawira in a *Daily Blog* broadcast on June 22, Fox declared that the Maori Party, which is a coalition partner in the current conservative National Party-led government, should be "the party of choice" to represent Maori in any government. "We will work with whoever forms the government," she said. "If I can work with National, I can work with anybody."

In the same interview, Harawira noted that the Maori Party had voted for all of National's austerity budgets, but insisted the two parties could still work together. He emphasised the importance of a deal between the two to avoid competing in the seven Maori electorates, in order to oust sitting Labour Party MPs. What is needed, he said, "is a conscious and powerful [Maori] voice in parliament."

Leading up to the Mana Party's annual general meeting last weekend, Harawira said the party is set to make a "comeback" after its dismal showing in 2014.

Harawira will again contest the northern Maori electorate of Te Tai Tokerau, which he lost to Labour in 2014 by more than 1,000 votes.

Bankrolled by the millionaire Dotcom, the Internet-Mana alliance was roundly rejected by the population and received a dismal 1.4 percent of the national vote. Harawira claimed Mana would again formulate policies around child poverty and housing the homeless in 2017. "The policies that Mana was pushing last time have become even more needed this time," he said.

Mana and the Maori Party both present themselves as an "independent voice" for Maori, who make up 15 percent of the population, but who overwhelmingly remain among the most impoverished and oppressed sections of the working class. In reality, both parties represent a privileged layer of Maori entrepreneurs, business operators, lawyers and academics that has been created over the past 30 years, largely through multi-million dollar Treaty of Waitangi payouts.

This elite layer has utilised the reactionary nostrums of identity politics and nationalism to divide the working class on racial lines. Maori workers, once among the most militant sections of New Zealand's industrial workforce, have been turned toward tribal identification and demands for "Tino Rangatiratanga," i.e. Maori "self-determination" or racially-established "indigenous" rights under capitalism.

Maori businesses, which control some \$NZ40 billion in assets, have emerged as key beneficiaries of the deepening exploitation of workers of all races. On the *Daily B log*, Fox and Harawira defended "Maori capitalism," depicting it as potentially more "progressive" than "Pakeha [white] capitalism." Both parties use the slogan of "Maori sovereignty" to demand a greater portion for Maori capitalists of the

surplus value extracted from the working class as a whole.

The Maori Party was formed in 2004 following a split with the then Labour government, which opposed tribal property claims to the foreshore and seabed. It is thoroughly discredited in the working class for its craven support of successive National-led governments. The Maori Party has been instrumental in imposing National's cutbacks to health and education, the destruction of thousands of public sector jobs and an increase in the regressive Goods and Services Tax. The party has been reduced from five seats in 2008, when it struck its deal with National, to just two after the last election.

Under conditions of deepening social crisis, including in his own electorate, Harawira split from the Maori Party in 2011 to found Mana as a new political trap for alienated sections of workers and youth. While Harawira had voted for all National's anti-working class policies over the previous two years, he demagogically declared the Maori Party had "betrayed the people who put it in power."

Mana's false posturing as "left-wing" and "pro-poor" has been consistently boosted by the pseudo-left groups—the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), Fightback and Socialist Aotearoa. Each formally affiliated with Mana and supported the alliance with the Internet Party, campaigning for Internet-Mana at the 2014 elections. These middle-class organisations fraudulently portray Mana's racial identity politics as "progressive" and seek to integrate themselves into the political establishment.

Following the Obama administration's announcement of its "pivot" against China, Mana joined Labour, the anti-immigrant NZ First Party and the Greens in seeking to whip up anti-Chinese xenophobia and scapegoating Chinese people for the country's housing crisis and unemployment.

Protests against the signing of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the US-led anti-China trade deal, in Auckland in February heavily promoted Maori nationalism and appear to have played a role in bringing about the rapprochement between the two parties. Both advanced the same nationalist objections to the TPP, denouncing the agreement as an attack on New Zealand's "sovereignty" and Maori rights under the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, while also warning it

could harm Maori business interests.

Underscoring its pro-capitalist program, the Maori Party last week voted to install Tukoroirangi Morgan as its new chairman. Between 1996 and 1999 Morgan was a NZ First Party MP. After losing his seat he joined the corporate leadership of the Tainui tribe's business arm, as chairman, overseeing more than \$1 billion in assets and investments. He is currently an advisor to the Maori "king," the principal figurehead of the Tainui tribe, whose inherited position dates from pre-European times.

Morgan immediately declared that he wants the Maori Party to become "more assertive" in its relationship with government and proposed to begin by "looking at immigration levels." He said Mana and the Maori Party could work together to take Maori seats off Labour and hold the balance of power. "I make no secret about it; that's the agenda," Morgan told the *Politik* blog.

Neither of the pseudo-left groups that remain affiliated with Mana—Socialist Aotearoa and Fightback—has said a word about its embrace of this government ally. Nor has the ISO. It formally ended its four-year alliance with Mana after the 2014 election, while making clear it had no differences with Mana's politics and would be "proud to work alongside" Mana in the future.

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