

New Zealand First to dictate make-up of next government

By John Braddock
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Following the inconclusive result in New Zealand's September 23 election the major parties, National and Labour, have each begun vying to form a coalition government with the right-wing, anti-Asian New Zealand (NZ) First Party.

According to provisional results, National, which has held office since 2008, remains the largest party with 46 percent of the vote (58 seats). Labour is on 35.8 percent (45 seats), and its close ally the Greens has 5.9 percent (7 seats), a combined total of 52 seats. NZ First is the third-largest party with 7.5 percent (9 seats).

On current figures, a Labour-Green-NZ First government would command a majority of just 61 to 59, while National-NZ First together have 67. This situation could change by one or two seats after an estimated 384,000 special votes, 15 percent of the total, are counted on October 7.

With a government not likely to be formed until mid-October, there is an atmosphere of crisis. The NZ dollar dropped to 72.54 US cents on September 26, down from 73.39 cents the previous week. One currency trader told the *New Zealand Herald* that the situation was "very much like a hung parliament."

NZ First leader Winston Peters held a press conference on September 27, declaring that he will not make any decision until after special votes are counted. He bluntly rejected incumbent Prime Minister Bill English's claim that National's lead over Labour gave him the "moral mandate" to form the next government.

On election night, Green Party co-leader James Shaw declared that Labour, NZ First and the Greens had acted together "in opposition" and collectively represented the "mood for change." Speaking on breakfast television, Labour leader Jacinda Ardern said that New Zealanders had "voted against the status quo" and she would seek to form a "stable coalition" with NZ First.

Following Ardern's elevation to the Labour leadership on August 1, the party was rescued from near electoral collapse, polling at just 23 percent, to reach 36 percent in the election. The swing represented a shift to Labour among young voters and sections of oppressed Maori in particular. However, it was a pale reflection of the mood of disaffection and opposition in the working class. The official turnout of 78.8 percent was just

above the 2014 figure of 77.9 percent, when more than a million people either abstained or did not register.

In another variant, on TVNZ's "Q & A" program on Sunday, former National Party prime minister Jim Bolger advocated a National-Greens coalition instead. He said National "wanted to talk to the Green Party," and the Greens had a "responsibility" to talk to National if the party was "serious about a clean, green New Zealand."

Any government that includes NZ First will be one of militarism, anti-immigrant chauvinism, economic protectionism and deepening attacks on so-called Chinese "interference" in business and politics. NZ First's election policies included sharp reductions to immigration and demands for jobs for "New Zealanders first," a massive increase in police numbers, the formation of a specialised flying squad "to target criminality and gangs," and large increases in military spending.

NZ First's program is similar to parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and France's National Front, which have been instrumental, under conditions of deepening social crisis and widespread popular alienation, in shifting official politics sharply to the right.

Last year Peters backed the reactionary Brexit campaign, telling the British to be "bold and courageous" and ditch the European Union in favour of the Commonwealth. In February, he defended US President Trump's looming onslaught on immigrants, telling Newstalk ZB that Trump was ensuring the "security of the country" and was "on the right track."

Following a terror attack in London in June, Peters delivered an anti-Muslim rant in parliament, insinuating that Muslim communities were harbouring terrorists. He declared that family and friends "choosing silence" to protect "these monsters" may be the "the culture of Damascus" and "acceptable in Tripoli," but "not in New Zealand."

Peters began his political career as a National Party MP in 1978. After being sacked for repeated criticism of the leadership, he set up NZ First in 1993 on an explicitly anti-immigrant, anti-Asian platform. At the same time he fraudulently posed as a critic of National and Labour's "neo-liberal" policies, such as privatisation, and as a defender of elderly retirees.

NZ First held the balance of power after the 1996 election and, defying expectations, formed a coalition with National. Peters secured the positions of deputy prime minister and treasurer, responsible for enforcing National's vicious attacks on the working class and welfare beneficiaries.

Labour won the 1999 election in a landslide, but by 2005 it was increasingly unpopular and turned to NZ First to prop up the government. Peters became minister of foreign affairs and helped to cement Labour's foreign policy rapprochement with Washington, following New Zealand's involvement in the invasions and neo-colonial occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, NZ First has adopted an even more right-wing, populist pose. NZ First joined national-protectionist protests against the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was championed by National, while stepping up its xenophobic outbursts against Asian immigration.

NZ First has set the standard for Labour, Greens, the Maori nationalist Mana Party, the trade unions and pseudo-left groups in attacking Chinese "influence" as the major threat to New Zealand's "sovereignty." The purpose of this campaign has been to shift Wellington into even closer alignment with the US, under conditions in which Washington has been preparing a war with China, and is threatening to "totally destroy" North Korea.

The National Party has sought to strengthen military-intelligence ties with the US while maintaining strong economic relations with China. As a result it will have difficulty reaching a deal with NZ First. National opposes NZ First's policy to slash immigration to just 10,000 per year, down from 72,000. Business leaders have declared that strong GDP growth and sectors of the economy such as agriculture and construction require high levels of immigration.

Peters last week repeated his call for an inquiry into National Party MP Jian Yang's purported links to "Chinese military intelligence." Reports just before the election that Yang had taught at a People's Liberation Army languages school more than 20 years ago are being used to whip up an anti-China witch-hunt. A report by a New Zealand academic based at the Wilson Center in Washington, a think tank largely funded by the US government, accused National of being "soft on China" and implied that many of its leading figures had been "bought off" through business contacts with Chinese firms.

While such an inquiry would be difficult for National to agree to, Labour has already backed the proposal. Ardern has indicated that a Labour-led government would empower the intelligence agencies to conduct an investigation into purported Chinese "agents on influence" in politics and business, a pretext for a shift towards a more overt alliance with Washington.

NZ First has no significant popular support. Its 7.5 percent of the vote is one percent less than it received in 2014. Under

conditions of deep popular alienation from the established set-up, the party is in a position to play a major role in the next government only because it has been fraudulently depicted by a layer of pro-Labour commentators, the Greens, trade unions, and pseudo-left groups, as "progressive," and "left wing."

Anti-TPP activist and academic Jane Kelsey—a favourite of the pseudo-left groups—praised Peters on Radio NZ, saying he would contribute to "openness in discussing how we should address trade and investment policies." Her praise is for the NZ First's championing of protectionist, trade war measures that will do nothing to defend jobs and conditions of the working class.

On the *Daily Blog*, Unite Union leader Mike Treen emphasised that on nearly "every significant economic and social policy" NZ First differs little from Labour. He cited pledges to raise the minimum wage, expand public transport, improve student allowances and access to tertiary education and to keep the pension age at 65.

Such promises whether by NZ First or Labour are as worthless as Trump's phony posturing to defend the interests of the American working class. At the start of the election campaign Labour and the Greens committed to "budget responsibility rules," including a strict spending limit and paying down debt, which means deepening National's austerity measures.

Whatever the makeup of the next government, it will be a class war administration at home and abroad. The conception of "progressive," as advanced by Labour and NZ First's apologists, is in fact a reactionary turn to national protectionism, scapegoating immigrants for low wages, unemployment and destruction of social services, and above all, support for US preparations for war against North Korea and China.

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