

New Zealand pseudo-lefts embrace new right-wing government

By John Braddock
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On October 26, the newly formed Labour-NZ First-Green Party government was sworn in by New Zealand's governor general. Led by Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, the coalition was announced three weeks after the September 23 election and is the result of sordid, back-room negotiations with the right-wing, anti-immigrant NZ First Party.

NZ First's elevation parallels the rise of far-right and authoritarian formations in countries around the world, including the US, Germany, France and Austria. Labour, however, has granted to the Trump-like party a role that vastly exceeds its level of popular support. With just 7.2 percent (9 seats) at the election, NZ First has secured four key cabinet posts, while the party's leader Winston Peters, an anti-Asian demagogue, has been installed as deputy prime minister and foreign affairs minister. Ron Mark, Peters' deputy and an advocate of massive increases in military spending, is the new defence minister.

The Labour-led government will pursue an extreme nationalist and militarist agenda, including attacks on immigrants, democratic rights and living conditions. On Wednesday, in her first international television interview, Ardern told CNN's Christiane Amanpour that she was "resolute" about implementing Labour's election promise to slash net migration by 20,000 to just 30,000 a year—a cut of up to 50 percent. The government's first order of business is to ban foreigners from buying New Zealand homes, a measure calculated to scapegoat Chinese investors for the cost of housing and stoke anti-Chinese xenophobia.

The sharp shift to the right by the entire ruling establishment has been engineered behind the backs of the population. Labour's coalition with NZ First signals a closer alignment with US war preparations against China and North Korea. A US-based think tank, the Wilson Center, published a report three days before the election accusing the National Party government of being "soft" on China, and insinuating that some of its leading figures had questionable financial relations with the Chinese government and corporations. At the same time, Trump's ambassador to New Zealand, Scott Brown, gave several media interviews, as negotiations regarding the new government were underway, to publicly indicate that Washington did not want the return of the National Party.

In response, a line-up of pro-Labour commentators, trade unions and pseudo-left groups—the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), Fightback and Socialist Aotearoa (SA)—is fraudulently portraying the new government as "progressive" and "left wing." Referencing Ardern's campaign slogan, self-styled "radical" columnist Chris Trotter intoned: "All of us, every progressive New Zealander, must help Jacinda and her Labour-NZ First-Green Government 'to do this'!"

These forces are seeking to blind the working class to the dangers that it faces. Labour has been brought into office to forestall an impending explosion of social unrest in the working class over war, inequality and declining living standards. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the previous National Party-led government imposed a brutal austerity regime that has produced escalating poverty, youth suicides and homelessness.

While Labour advanced no policies to oppose this assault, Ardern's installation as party leader in August saw the party widely promoted as embodying the mood for "change." Labour recovered from a low of 23 percent in the polls to reach 36 percent at the election, enough to negotiate the formation of a coalition government with "king maker" Peters.

Throughout the election, the pseudo-lefts campaigned for Labour and the Greens as a "lesser evil" to National. After remaining silent throughout the anti-democratic coalition negotiations, the ISO hailed the Labour-NZ First deal as delivering on a promise of "hope and change."

In an October 25 article, the ISO fawned: "Labour has announced plans better than the International Socialists dared hope possible. There are real reforms set up here, and proposals which, if implemented, will bring real benefits to the lives of working people."

Leader of the Unite union Mike Treen, who works closely with Socialist Aotearoa, declared that Labour's promise to lift the minimum wage to \$20 an hour, from the current poverty level of \$15.75 by 2021, was a "big win for workers and should be celebrated."

In reality, Labour has pledged to abide by the "budget responsibility rules" that it agreed with the Greens early in the election, to keep government spending below 30 percent of GDP, the same level as in National's austerity budgets.

Wellington Chamber of Commerce CEO John Milford declared himself “comforted” by Ardern’s assurances that hers would be a “government of partnership” with business, which includes tax cuts for “small and medium” companies. Even if the minimum wage were raised, the paltry increase would in no way address soaring living costs.

Labour’s highly conditional promises include the introduction of one year of fees-free tertiary study, for new students only, and a review of the punitive sanctions regime for welfare recipients. Several measures in education, including doing away with the National Standards testing regime, have been foreshadowed, along with an undertaking to construct a grossly inadequate total of 1,000 state-funded houses per year.

These meagre measures are nothing but window-dressing for Ardern’s reactionary agenda, including a raft of repressive legislation that will be used to suppress deepening opposition in the working class. Labour, supported by the unions, intends to ban strikes during employment contract negotiations; it has promised 1,800 more police, an increase of nearly 20 percent; a “work-for-the-dole” scheme; and the expansion of an existing military training program for unemployed youth.

The ISO and SA, which both support US imperialist intervention in Syria, have said nothing about the blatant US intervention in the election to ensure that the next government supports Trump’s threats against North Korea and China.

Ardern has already declared that New Zealand’s relationship with the US, including membership in the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing network, “is incredibly important. That has not changed and it will not change.” Her first overseas visits will be to Australia, New Zealand’s main military ally, and to the APEC conference in Vietnam, where she expects to meet US President Trump.

For years, Labour’s apologists have sought to legitimise NZ First and its xenophobic policies. Writing in the trade union-funded *Daily Blog* last week, Trotter warmly described Peters as a “patriot,” while Treen praised him for his demagogic exclamation that capitalism was working against many people. For its part, the ISO claimed that NZ First, while it had a “conservative” base, was “leaning left for now economically.”

The ISO falsely declared that Labour and NZ First’s anti-immigrant rhetoric was “thankfully, toned down” during the election. In reality, both parties made severe cuts to immigration the centrepiece of their campaigns. *Newsroom* reported that Labour lost votes in some working-class Auckland seats due to its anti-immigrant stance.

Last Saturday, Fightback and the ISO helped organise an anti-racism protest in Wellington to counter a tiny gathering of the fascist National Front outside parliament. Invited to speak were two Green Party MPs, Golriz Ghahraman and Marama Davidson.

The Greens, who for the first time have three ministers outside cabinet, previously denounced NZ First as “racist.”

They are nevertheless going to work closely with the party and support the government’s anti-immigrant and anti-Chinese measures. To this end, they will likely endorse Peters’ demand for an inquiry into the status of National Party MP Jian Yang who, as part of an intensifying anti-Chinese witch hunt, has been accused of being an “agent” of the Chinese Communist Party.

The pseudo-lefts’ promotion of Labour is to maintain the political subordination of workers and students to capitalist parties by promoting the illusion that they can be “pressured” to the left. In 2015, they glorified the Greek Syriza government, on the basis of phoney claims that it would oppose austerity measures dictated by the international financial elite. Syriza then worked hand-in-glove with the IMF, the EU and international banks to impose even deeper attacks on the Greek population, while forming a coalition with the Independent Greeks—an anti-immigrant nationalist formation whose leader was appointed as minister of defence.

In the 2011 and 2014 New Zealand elections, Fightback, SA and the ISO joined and campaigned on behalf of the Maori nationalist Mana Party, which they glorified as “pro-poor” and “anti-capitalist.” In fact, Mana represents those sections of Maori business that favour more national-protectionist policies and supported Labour’s scapegoating of Chinese people for the housing crisis.

The pseudo-lefts’ embrace of NZ First, Labour and the Greens serves to underscore their class character. These organisations are not socialist. They are part of the bourgeois establishment, orbiting the trade unions and supporting Labour *because* of its program of nationalism, anti-Chinese protectionism and militarism, including the defence of New Zealand imperialism’s alliance with the United States. Their politics reflect the social interests of privileged layers of the upper-middle class, including academics, trade union officials and the beneficiaries of various identity politics-based, state-funded bodies, who benefit materially, in myriad ways, from these policies.

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