

Labour's majority slashed in New Zealand by-election

John Braddock
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The New Zealand Labour Party had a 6,000 vote majority almost wiped out in a by-election for the Mana electorate on November 20, less than 12 months out from the next general election. The poll was called after Labour's sitting MP, Winnie Laban, resigned from parliament to take up a university post.

Mana, a predominantly working class electorate in the northern suburbs of Wellington, the country's capital city, has been held by Labour for the past 75 years. It was considered the ninth safest seat in the country and one of Labour's bastions. The party only just clung on after a 14 percent swing towards the governing National Party, leaving the seat now classed as "marginal".

On election night, Labour candidate Kris Faafoi, press secretary for Labour leader Phil Goff and a former television news journalist, took the seat with 10,397 votes, beating National's Hekia Parata by a mere 1,080 votes. Labour's share of the vote was 46.4 percent, and National's 41.6 percent. Green Party candidate Jan Logie won 1493 votes (6.6 percent), matching the 2008 election result. Matt McCarten, a prominent union official who ran as an independent "left" candidate was fourth with 816 votes.

The result is an indictment of Labour, both in government and opposition. By-elections are traditionally regarded as a referendum on the incumbent administration. Despite National's imposition of brutal austerity measures in the wake of the 2008 recession, working people are deserting Labour and refusing to return. The result confirms a pattern that has prevailed since Labour was ousted from office in 2008, leaving it languishing well behind National in every poll.

Prime Minister John Key gloated over the result: "Sometimes losing is winning and this is one of them where we have had a tremendous result here." He predicted the vote would undermine Goff's leadership, saying: "In all probability, the swing should have gone against National because that's what happens when you are the government campaigning in a very safe Labour seat and he (i.e. Goff) has been thrashed."

Parata claimed the result was a resounding vote for National's "aspirational" policies, but National's tally actually fell by more than 2,000 votes, from 11,915 to 9,317, since the

last election, in which she was also the National candidate.

The results, in fact, point to deepening social polarisation and political alienation. Parata's support was drawn mainly from the better-off suburbs, including the newer estate areas of Whitby and Aotea, where National's majority increased from 54 percent to 67 percent of the vote. On the Kapiti coast, Labour's 2008 majority of 5 percent was transformed into a 10 percent win for National.

By contrast, the western, eastern and southern areas of Porirua, dominated by state housing, are among the most impoverished in the country. The largely Pacific Island and Maori communities consistently figure among the worst for social statistics such as unemployment, poverty, poor housing, health problems caused by lack of decent nutrition, and overcrowding. Large numbers of people from these areas refused to vote. The total vote count was 22,387 out of 48,000 registered voters, an extremely low turnout of 47 percent, with 12,372 fewer voters than in 2008. Labour suffered a sharp downturn in its vote in the industrial area of Porirua West, where only 66 percent of ballots were cast compared with 2008, and in Porirua East where it was 72 percent.

Disenchanted former Labour supporters defied considerable efforts to get them to the polls. Labour had saturated the electorate with billboards and, with the help of affiliated unions, numbers of party campaigners from across the country. The day before the polls, Faafoi told the *Dominion Post*: "People are aware turning out is going to be a big issue". Last minute appeals by Goff for a large turnout failed to have any effect.

National's assault on living standards has particularly hit working people, youth and the poor. Unemployment has risen to nearly 7 percent, while the regressive consumption tax (GST) has increased from 12.5 to 15 percent. A poll published in the *Sunday Star Times* on November 21 reported the government's fiscal and tax policies to be highly unpopular. A majority of respondents—53 percent—said they were worse off under National, especially since the GST rise in October. Low-

income earners have fared the worst. Some 71 percent of people in households earning \$20,000 a year or less were worse off, as were 60 percent of those earning between \$20,000 and \$30,000.

In the face of this social reversal, ordinary people have no faith that Labour represents any alternative. Throughout its last term in office from 1999-2008, living standards, pay and conditions all stagnated, while the media boasted of “rivers of gold” running through the share market. People in their tens of thousands were forced to turn to credit and mortgage finance as a coping mechanism.

In opposition, Labor has given bipartisan support to National’s social and economic assault on the working class and remained fully committed to New Zealand’s support for neo-colonial military interventions in Afghanistan and the Pacific.

Head of Unite Union, McCarten posed as a “left”, standing on three slogans: raising the minimum wage from \$12.75 to \$15 an hour, removing the GST, and 3,000 jobs “for Mana”. Far from presenting any genuine alternative to poverty, inequality and the assault on jobs and basic rights, McCarten’s campaign was an opportunist stunt, inviting voters to support him in order to “send a message to parliament”. In a number of interviews, McCarten admitted that his primary aim was to exert “pressure” on the Labour Party.

McCarten has a long history as a “left” apologist for Labor and the official political establishment. In 1989, after serving as Labour’s electorate chairman for Auckland Central, along with MP and former party president Jim Anderton, he quit in protest against state asset sales. Together McCarten and Anderton formed New Labour, which subsequently joined with three other minor parties, including the Greens, to form the Alliance. By appealing to mass popular opposition to the pro-market offensive and austerity policies of the Nationals, and benefitting from the new system of proportional representation voting in 1996, they established a foothold in parliament, winning up to 18 percent of the vote.

When Labour returned to office in 1989, the Alliance, with 11 MPs and McCarten as party chairman, entered the government as a coalition partner, providing minor pieces of window-dressing while the government as a whole—including the Alliance MPs— continued to implement the demands of big business in domestic and foreign policy. In 2002, the Alliance collapsed in ignominy, when its MPs voted to support Labour’s decision to deploy elite SAS troops to the US-led invasion of Afghanistan.

Along with other ex-Alliance leaders, McCarten turned his attention to the unions, and “grass-roots organising”, simply

dismissing the Alliance project as a “bad experience”. He identified young low-paid workers as a potential base and set up the Unite Union, which quickly grew from 200 to over 5,000 members.

McCarten positioned Unite as the chief bargaining agent in the fast food industry, and it won a few limited concessions from employers. The union was soon acknowledged by employers as an important mechanism for controlling an emerging movement among young workers against low wages. Likewise the Council of Trade Unions (CTU) bureaucracy recognised its role in providing a degree of credibility among youth to their own discredited apparatus and the two organisations affiliated. McCarten was rewarded for his services to the political establishment with his own weekly political column in the right-wing *Herald on Sunday* newspaper.

McCarten return to “official” political activity has been accompanied by speculation within the “radical” fraternity about the possible foundation of a new “left” party. As Labour’s vote disintegrates, and hostility towards the entire official establishment intensifies, New Zealand’s “ex-lefts” are preparing new mechanisms, in line with their counterparts in France, Australia and elsewhere, to head off and divert the inevitable eruption of mass struggles by the working class, and to channel them back behind the unions and Labour Party.

The most urgent task facing workers and young people in New Zealand is to make a conscious political break with these old, reactionary and bankrupt organisations, and turn to the development of a new independent political movement of the working class, based on the principles of socialist internationalism. This requires the building of a New Zealand section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement.



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