

New Zealand election: Mana Party a new political trap for workers

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A new political party, the Mana Party, is contesting the New Zealand general election on November 26. The party (Mana means “prestige” or “authority”) was formed in April after parliamentarian Hone Harawira quit the Maori Party, saying it had become too closely aligned with the National-led government. The Maori Party, founded in 2004 as a breakaway from the Labour Party, is a partner in the ruling right-wing coalition.

Harawira also resigned from parliament, triggering a June by-election in his Northland Te Tai Tokerau seat, one of seven special Maori seats. The result revealed the yawning gulf between Maori people and all parties—only 41 percent of the 32,800 registered electors voted. Harawira’s previous majority of 6,000 was slashed to 867 and his share of the vote slumped from 60 to 48 percent. Nevertheless, Harawira claimed that he had won a fresh mandate to represent the impoverished indigenous population, boasting that he had a base of support among the “young and the poor.”

Harawira’s posturing is entirely bogus. He was a member of the Maori Party caucus that went into coalition with National after the 2008 election, and voted for all its anti-working class measures. The Maori Party supported National’s agenda of attacking welfare beneficiaries and youth, “downsizing” the public sector and increasing the regressive Goods and Services Tax (GST). The government gave tax cuts to the rich and imposed drastic cuts to living standards. The Maori Party’s principal initiative, the Whanau Ora welfare program, opened the door to the privatisation of welfare.

In his own electorate, Harawira oversaw a social disaster. According to a *New Zealand Herald* report in June, unemployment in the Northland electorate was at “crisis levels,” hitting 9.8 percent in the first quarter this

year—the highest since 2003 and almost 2 percentage points above the next-highest region. A fifth of the working-age population, 29 percent of young people aged 18-24, and 48 percent of working-age Maori were on welfare.

Harawira’s break from the Maori Party was not the product of any principled opposition to its anti-working class policies, but was in response to National’s replacement of Labour’s Foreshore and Seabed Act. Under pressure from big business and the media, the Labour government in 2004 removed the right of tribes to establish traditional ownership rights over the inter-tidal zone, thus eliminating lucrative business opportunities in areas such as aquaculture. National and the Maori Party agreed to a new law that would enable tribes to establish “customary title” in court over sections of the foreshore. Harawira denounced the deal as “a sell-out” on the grounds that Maori should not have to “prove” customary use.

A layer of Maori nationalists and figures from New Zealand’s pseudo-radical milieu flocked to the Mana Party, reinforcing Harawira’s phoney claims to be a champion of the poor and oppressed. Unite Union official Mike Treen circulated an “open letter” saying Mana would represent “a major step forward for a genuine working-class political voice in Aotearoa/New Zealand.” Treen is a former leader of the Pabloite Socialist Action League, which once falsely claimed to represent Trotskyism in New Zealand.

Treen stated that the new party would be “pro-worker,” “anti neo-liberal, against monopoly capitalism and against privatisation of the people’s assets” and would “put an end to economic policies that drive people into poverty, and then penalise them for being poor.” He emphasised

Mana's pro-union credentials, noting that "several trade unionists" were taking leadership roles and had "offered to contribute to its policy." Far from defending workers, the unions have worked with Labour and National governments to impose pro-market restructuring and privatisation over the past three decades, helping to devastate working-class living standards.

Mana Party chairman Matt McCarten is also head of the Unite Union and a longstanding "left" personality. He and other pseudo-radicals played a politically criminal role in stifling the opposition of the working class to the Labour government in the period 1984-90. As Labour's membership base deserted it and demands for strike action against the assault on jobs and conditions grew, the "lefts" headed off a political struggle against Labour's right-wing leadership by establishing firstly NewLabour, then the Alliance, to block any independent mobilisation of the working class. Now they are seeking to establish another political trap for workers by presenting Mana as a new "left" alternative.

Mana's policies are steeped in nationalism and profoundly anti-working class. While replete with empty promises to abolish the GST, raise the minimum wage to \$15 per hour, and lift welfare benefits to pre-1991 levels, the party proposes to abolish the dole for the unemployed and to discriminate against immigrants by "prioritising the employment of New Zealand residents." Its opposition to the Key government's planned further asset sales is rooted in New Zealand nationalism—asserting that "NZ lands" should be protected from foreign ownership. It has published no foreign policy platform, and only belatedly called for NZ troops to be withdrawn from Afghanistan following the deaths of two SAS troopers last month.

The party's program centres on identity politics, which has been used for decades to divide the working class on ethnic lines. Mana calls for Maori "self determination," which is an orientation to the business interests of a privileged layer. The Mana Party is demanding that multi-million dollar land claims under the Treaty of Waitangi be extended, further enriching tribal leaders. Recent research by Berl economist Ganesh Nana puts the combined asset base of Maori tribes at \$NZ36.9 billion—a fortune built up on the exploitation of workers of all ethnic backgrounds.

Underlining the backward, anti-working class character

of Maori nationalist politics, Harawira has slandered sections of workers and student youth as "rednecks." Before entering parliament via the Maori Party, he had been the CEO of a number of Maori community trusts and businesses. He has a record of racist outbursts, including blaming "white motherf...ers" for "raping our [Maori] lands and ripping us off for centuries."

In the lead-up to the election, Mana has sought to downplay its communalist politics with campaign billboards proclaiming it as a party "for all." Alongside Harawira and prominent Maori nationalist activist, lawyer Annette Sykes, two of its most prominent candidates are former Green MP Sue Bradford, and Unite official John Minto, a leader of the 1981 anti-apartheid protests against the visiting South African rugby team.

Mana has emerged under conditions of deepening austerity following the 2008 global financial crisis. Labour is deeply discredited after its last period in office from 1999 to 2008, in which it presided over the further erosion of living standards and deepening social inequality. There is widespread political disenchantment and alienation from all the major parties. Among youth, who have been hit hardest by unemployment and poor conditions, almost a third of 18- to 24-year-olds and a fifth of 25- to 29-year-olds have not enrolled to vote.

The ex-lefts have promoted the Mana Party in a bid to fill the political vacuum. Its role is to divert the emerging radicalisation among youth and workers into the dead-end of Maori nationalism, identity politics, trade unionism and support for the parliamentary set-up. For its pseudo-radical supporters, their embrace of Mana and Harawira represents a further step to the right as they seek to carve out a place for themselves within the political establishment.



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