

Working people disenfranchised in New Zealand election

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New Zealand voters go to the polls tomorrow in a general election that is likely to see the conservative National Party government returned with a significantly increased majority. The final TV One News poll released on Thursday showed National had just over 50 percent support, enough to be the first party to govern alone since the introduction of the proportional voting system in 1996.

An electoral disaster is facing the main opposition Labour Party. Its 28 percent support foreshadows the party's worst result since the deeply unpopular "free-market" Lange-Douglas Labour government was thrown out of office in an electoral landslide to National in 1990. Among the minor parties, the Greens have improved their polling from 6 to 10 percent, and the right-wing populist NZ First is registering 4.2 percent. If NZ First reaches a 5 percent threshold, it will regain a presence in parliament, which it lost at the 2008 election.

The situation highlights a sharp shift to the right in official politics under the impact of the worsening global economic crisis. The election campaign has been dominated by a debate about which party can better slash government spending, leaving the working class totally disenfranchised. All parties have made clear their commitment to a program of austerity designed to make workers pay for the economic breakdown.

Since taking office in 2008, when New Zealand was already in recession, Prime Minister John Key's government has unswervingly carried out the demands of big business and international financiers for spending cuts. Despite this, the budget deficit has blown out to \$NZ18.4 billion, while combined public and private debt stands at 70 percent of gross domestic product. At the outset of the election campaign, the international ratings agencies downgraded the country's credit rating as a sharp warning to all the parties to rein in debt.

Ordinary working people are struggling with soaring living costs, exacerbated by an increase in the regressive Goods and Services Tax from 12.5 to 15 percent. Not only does 18 percent of the population, and one in four children, live in poverty, but unemployment has almost doubled from 3.5 percent in 2007 to 6.6 percent. The government has laid off 2,500 public sector workers, and intends to sack hundreds more after the election.

Meanwhile, the super-wealthy have increased their fortunes. The Key government cut the company tax rate from 30 to 28 percent and the top income tax rate from 38 to 33 percent, providing a massive transfer of wealth to the rich. Over the past year, the country's 150 wealthiest individuals increased their collective wealth by 20 percent, or \$NZ7 billion.

Key has presided over two ongoing social disasters. Following the February earthquake which devastated Christchurch and killed 181 people, the government has condemned 6,500 properties, effectively shutting down major working class areas. Hundreds of "red zone" home owners have protested against the government's buy-out offers, which are typically well below the price of a new house.

Last November, 29 miners were killed in an explosion at Pike River Coal mine. The government—supported by Labour, the unions, the Greens and the corporate media—declared that it was "absurd" to suggest that the company had compromised safety to cut costs. A royal commission of inquiry has since heard overwhelming evidence that the mine was a disaster waiting to happen. Successive Labour and National governments prepared the catastrophe by drastically cutting funding for mines inspectors, while legislating to allow the industry to self-regulate.

National also has deepened military ties with the US,

continuing a process begun by the previous Labour government. It re-deployed New Zealand's elite SAS troops to bolster the US occupation of Afghanistan, where they have been implicated in war crimes, including shooting civilians, and handing prisoners over to the Afghan Crisis Response Unit, which is notorious for torture.

While its policies have devastated the lives of ordinary people, National has earned the endorsement of big business. According to the Electoral Commission's website, virtually all the biggest campaign donations from business figures have gone to National and the far-right party ACT. The country's CEOs are calling on Key to "harden up" on welfare, tax, government spending and the retirement age during his next term in office.

Neither Labour nor the Greens offer any alternative. Labour set the framework for the election campaign by promising to raise the retirement age to 67 and save \$100 billion over 20 years. With the support of the Greens, it then focussed on National's asset sales program, which aims to sell minority shareholdings in three publicly-owned power companies and Air New Zealand. Labour's "opposition" to asset sales is widely viewed with cynicism. In the 1980s, the Labour government, in which its current leader Phil Goff was a cabinet minister, began the process of privatisation. Labour and the Greens have based their current anti-privatisation stance on reactionary New Zealand nationalism, demagogically asserting that assets should not be sold off to "foreigners."

Labour's other election promises—raising the minimum wage from \$13 to \$15 an hour, returning to a more centralised pay bargaining system enforced by the unions, minor adjustments to tax and social welfare—have also provoked considerable scepticism. Following its term of office in the 1980s, Labour held government from 1999 to 2008 and presided over falling wages, rising social inequality and increasing poverty. As a result of these bitter experiences, the Labour Party is regarded with distrust, contempt and hostility among wide layers of workers. Goff's personal popularity rating barely scrapes into double figures, reflecting his role in Labour's history of betrayals.

The main beneficiary of Labour's slump in support has been the Green Party, which has emerged as the leading minor party in the campaign. While making certain appeals on the questions of the environment and child poverty, the Greens are a thoroughly big business formation. Some media commentators have raised the possibility of a National-Greens coalition, suggesting it might not be wise for

National to govern alone. Greens co-leader Metiria Turei this week described the two parties' relationship as one in which "the door is open, but with the chain on."

A key role is also being played by various pseudo-left figures and groupings. Far from offering any progressive alternative, assorted ex-members of the Greens, New Labour and Alliance, have joined hands with Unite Union leaders to promote the right-wing former Maori Party parliamentarian Hone Harawira and his new Mana Party. Mana, which the ex-radicals hail as a movement representing the poor, is in fact a deeply reactionary formation steeped in New Zealand nationalism and identity politics. It stands for the division of the working class along ethnic lines, anti-immigrant chauvinism and Maori "self-determination."

The working class confronts an entire political line-up that is openly hostile to its class interests and advocates social and economic policies that are inimical to its pressing needs. Many workers will hold their noses and vote for the party they regard as the "lesser evil." Many will not bother to vote at all. But neither option provides a means of fighting the austerity program that the next government will impose regardless of its composition.

There is no quick fix solution to this political impasse. The betrayals of the Labour and trade union leaderships, amid the worst global economic crisis since the 1930s, flow directly from their nationalist and pro-capitalist program.

Workers can only defend their interests on the basis of an internationalist and socialist perspective aimed at abolishing the present social order and restructuring society to meet the needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few. This requires, above all, the construction in New Zealand of a section of the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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