

Labour routed in New Zealand election

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The New Zealand general election held on Saturday saw the conservative National-led government of Prime Minister John Key returned with an increased majority, but just short of the numbers needed to govern in its own right. With 48 percent of the vote, National holds 60 seats in the 121-member parliament.

Key is likely to establish a coalition with ACT, United Future and the Maori Party—three minor parties that supported his government during its previous three-year term. ACT and United Future are only back in parliament, with one MP each, because of “tactical voting” deals which saw National supporters vote for them in two electorates.

The election was a rout for the Labour Party. Labour gained just 27 percent of the vote, its worst result since 1928. This was despite National’s profoundly anti-working class record, which has seen it impose a series of austerity measures since the 2008 global financial crisis, resulting in growing poverty, lower living standards and deepening social inequality.

As an indicator of the increasing alienation of voters from all the established parties, only 74 percent of registered voters turned out to vote, dropping by 90,000 from the 79.5 percent in 2008. According to the *New Zealand Herald*, it was the lowest turnout in percentage terms in 120 years. Moreover, only an estimated 93.2 percent of the 3.3 million people who were eligible to vote were enrolled, so that, while 2.3 million did cast votes, more than 1 million stayed away. Voting is not compulsory, but non-registration can incur a fine. Large numbers of young people had not registered; only 77 percent of those aged 18 to 24 were enrolled. Youth enrolment has been declining since 2002.

Labour’s ranks were further thinned from 2008, when, after nine years in office, it won just 34 percent of the votes. It will lose nine MPs from its 43 in the last parliament. In addition to its 22 electorate seats it will, under the mixed-member proportional system, get just 12 list MPs.

Labour lost electorates that just a few years ago were considered strongholds. Brendon Burns, who tied with his National opponent on 10,493 votes in Christchurch Central, is needing special votes to decide if he holds the seat. Labour has held the seat since 1946, and won in 2005 with a margin of 8,000. It also underlines Labour’s abject failure to win support in the country’s second largest city, now a devastated earthquake zone and the centre of an unfolding economic and social disaster.

Elsewhere, in Waimakariri, National cabinet minister Kate Wilkinson defeated the Labour incumbent Clayton Cosgrove, whose majority has been falling since 2002, when he held a majority of 10,000. Two prominent ex-union officials, Rick Barker, Labour’s chief whip, and Carol Beaumont, lost their seats. Labour has all but been wiped out in the provincial centres.

Another notable failure was that of ex-Labour president and Engineers Union head, Andrew Little, in New Plymouth. The seat had been held for two decades by Labour MP Harry Duynhoven before its loss to National in 2008. Touted as a future party leader, Little needed to regain the seat for Labour to establish his credentials. Little’s union was responsible for the weakening of safety conditions that led to the explosion at the Pike River mine last year, in which 29 miners were killed. While Little will enter parliament via Labour’s list, he was soundly beaten in the electorate vote by the sitting National member, who increased his majority from 105 to 4,130.

The results exposed the general contempt of working people for Labour’s false posturing as some sort of “alternative.” National promised to sell off minority shareholdings in three state-owned power companies and Air NZ, a move Labour claimed to oppose, principally on the nationalist basis that the shares were likely to be taken by “foreigners.” Polling consistently showed that between 70 and 80 percent of voters opposed the asset sales agenda, but they refused to back Labour, well aware that the Lange Labour government of 1984-90 was responsible for opening up the asset sale agenda in the first place.

The two parties that benefitted most from Labour’s demise

were the Greens, who increased their vote to 10.6 percent, winning four more seats to give them 13, and the right wing-populist NZ First, with 6.8 percent of the vote and eight seats. NZ First returns to parliament after failing in 2008 to reach the 5 percent threshold.

The Greens made an appeal on the basis of their environmental policies and expressed concern for child poverty. Throughout the campaign they made an orientation toward National, however, indicating they would seek to sign an “enhanced memorandum of understanding” to work with the incoming government.

NZ First is a reactionary nationalist and anti-immigrant party that formerly entered coalition governments with National, in 1996, and Labour in 2005, when leader Winston Peters took the post of foreign affairs minister. Its resurgence in this election, which caught the mainstream commentators by surprise, came after Peters declared that he would sit on the cross-benches and not formally support Labour or National. Peters promised to oppose both National’s asset sales and Labour’s proposal to raise the retirement age to 67 years. As a result a layer of voters backed NZ First as a protest against both the major parties.

The Maori Party, which is based in the seven special Maori electorates and represents a privileged layer of tribal leaders, suffered from its unstinting support as a coalition partner in the National-led government. It lost two seats, one to Labour and one to Hone Harawira, the leader of the newly-formed Mana Party. The latter, despite being backed by various pseudo-left groups on the false basis that it would represent “all the poor,” failed to win any seats outside Harawira’s own electorate and ended up with just 1 percent of the total votes.

Prime Minister Key was rebuffed on a referendum to scrap the country’s German-style mixed member proportional voting system. Voters rejected by 53.7 percent any switch to a different system that would make it easier for the major parties to obtain absolute majorities.

On Saturday night, Key claimed that National’s victory was the most emphatic since the party’s trouncing of Labour in the wake of the 1951 waterfront strike. Asked what his first priority would be, Key replied: “welfare reform.” His comments highlight the coming agenda, which will mean a brutal attack on the basic rights and conditions of the working class as the global economic crisis worsens. The unprecedented numbers who refused to vote, or expressed a protest in some form, indicates that the immense struggles ahead will see working people increasingly turn outside the existing party set-up for a means to fight.

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A number of voters spoke to the WSWS in Wellington about the election campaign.

Alisha and her partner **Amar** were deeply concerned about the growing rate of poverty. “We watched the Inside New Zealand TV show on child poverty,” Alisha explained. “I don’t think people realise how much poverty there is in New Zealand. We’re ranked 29th in the OECD, so you think we’d be better than that. Children used to get given milk every day in schools. Now we can’t even afford to buy it.”

Amar, a nurse, said: “It’s ridiculous that we’re paying tax for things like fruit and vegetables, when things that are not good for you are cheaper to buy. That’s not good for the health system. It’s a hard time at the moment for everyone in New Zealand. I don’t know if there’s much hope of things changing after the election.”

Alisha, a teacher, explained that National’s plan to introduce “league tables” to supposedly measure schools’ performance meant “teachers will have to get performance pay, which worries me extremely. The government says every child counts but what happens if they don’t come to school with breakfast or in bad health, or if they’ve got dyslexia? None of that is actually included in performance stats. They talk about a normal child, but there’s really no such thing.”

Carole, a primary school teacher of 40 years, opposed National’s plan to sell shares in power companies and Air New Zealand: “I’m old enough to remember when the last lot were sold and I thought that was a stinking idea.” Commenting on the National government’s education policy, released just days before the election, she said “league tables” would be used to blame teachers for social factors that were beyond their control. Asked about the deepening economic crisis, Carole said: “There’s just so much greed in the world. It’s unbelievable that people make money from doing nothing.”

Matt, a public servant, did not identify with any of the parties. He was considering going back to university but was worried about National’s plans for tertiary education: “There was a sentence in the newspaper saying that student loans would be limited, but they didn’t say how they’d be limited.” Asked if he would remain in New Zealand, he said: “If I didn’t have a job I wouldn’t have much keeping me here.”



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