

New Zealand “Not for Sale” campaign promotes anti-Chinese sentiment

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17 May 2012

Following a decision by New Zealand’s National Party government to allow the sale of 16 privately-owned farms to the Chinese company Shanghai Penqxin, a grouping of pseudo-left organisations, in league with the opposition Labour Party, the Greens, Maori nationalists, and the unions, have launched a reactionary protest campaign under the slogan “Aotearoa [New Zealand] is Not for Sale.”

The campaign takes place under conditions of sharpening international tensions, as the United States seeks to contain China and reassert its dominance over the Asia-Pacific. By singling out Chinese land sales as a focus for the protests and whipping up anti-Chinese sentiment, the organisers are aligning with sections of the New Zealand ruling elite that back the Obama administration’s confrontational stance towards China.

The protests are also designed to channel popular hostility to the National government of Prime Minister John Key and its harsh, anti-working class agenda, behind the Labor Party and the Greens. Following its re-election last November, the Key government launched an assault on jobs and conditions and cuts to public services. Thousands of workers have been thrust into bitter struggles over employer moves to destroy jobs and drive down wages and conditions. Now the government plans to privatise three public power companies and Air New Zealand. According to opinion polls, these plans are opposed by up to 80 percent of respondents, who fear price rises and job losses.

The Labour Party’s backing for the “Not for Sale” campaign is entirely cynical. In the 1980s, the Lange-Douglas Labour government was responsible for privatising a raft of major state-owned enterprises, including the Bank of New Zealand, Telecom and New

Zealand Rail, including to international buyers. The Clark Labour government from 1999 to 2008 then oversaw the privatisation of some 10 percent of the country’s land area.

In conjunction with the NZ Council of Trade Unions and the senior citizens’ organisation Grey Power, Labour has launched a petition to get 10 percent of enrolled electors—about 300,000 people—signed up for a citizens’ initiated referendum, purportedly to stop the asset sales. Far from being a campaign against privatisation, however, the petition is being promoted under the nationalist slogan “Vote to grow our economy, not someone else’s.” Its purpose is to divert opposition to the selling-off of remaining state-owned assets into a campaign against their potential sale to non-New Zealand based business concerns. Notably, the “local” rival to Shanghai Pengxin’s bid for farmland is a consortium that includes Maori tribal business interests headed by merchant banker Michael Fay, who became a multi-millionaire orchestrating Labour’s previous privatisation program.

The organisers of the “Aotearoa is Not for Sale” campaign, including Socialist Aotearoa, the Workers Party and the Unite Union, are serving to channel legitimate mass opposition to the government’s austerity agenda into chauvinism and nationalism. They are helping create an amalgam between the attacks on the working class and the decision to allow Shanghai Penqxin to purchase a small number of farms, and use this to promote anti-Chinese sentiment. In doing so, they have lined up with not only Labour and the Greens, but the right-wing, populist NZ First Party.

Anti-Chinese rhetoric dominated the launch of an 11-day protest march from the Far North to Wellington on April 23. Mana Party leader and MP Hone Harawira

declared; “If you are pissed off at the Chinese buying our land under the Crafar Farm sale, then join us. If you don’t want to see our electricity companies being sold to foreign companies and then the price of power go up, then join us... We need to send the strongest message possible to this government and to overseas companies who are eyeing up our land and assets.” All the pseudo-left groups have falsely promoted the Maori nationalist Mana Party as a progressive alternative since its launch prior to the 2011 elections.

At an 8,000-strong protest when the march passed through Auckland on April 28, Labour Party leader David Shearer, who had previously denounced the farm sale as “unpatriotic”, underlined the anti-foreigner theme. He declared: “We don’t want to see John Key selling off New Zealand.” Unite Union official John Minto said New Zealand was “under attack”, and that it was time for “everyday New Zealanders to fight back.” When the protest arrived at parliament in Wellington on May 4, Winston Peters, a former National Party cabinet minister who founded NZ First in 1993 on an explicit anti-immigrant program, was given the platform. A leading member of the so-called Workers Party held up the megaphone for him.

The Green Party is particularly active in fomenting anti-Chinese sentiment. Its leader, Russell Norman, claimed that the government had capitulated to Beijing over the sale following the mid-April visit by Chinese officials to Wellington. Green MP Gareth Hughes denounced the “the authoritarian Chinese government”, and demagogically stated: “Do we really want to sell off our land, our assets and our infrastructure to companies that operate under the direction of the Chinese government?”

As well as diverting social tensions, the xenophobic “Not for Sale” campaign dovetails with pressure from Washington on New Zealand and countries throughout the Asia-Pacific to align with the aggressive US “pivot” against China. The furore about the land sales highlights the dilemma of the New Zealand ruling class over its longstanding military ties with the US on the one hand, and its burgeoning economic relationship with China on the other.

The Labour Party and Greens are functioning as the voice for those sections of the ruling elite that consider New Zealand has no option but to fully support Washington. As the US steps up diplomatic, economic and military pressure on Beijing, and heightens tensions and the danger of a confrontation, not a word has been

raised by the pseudo-left organisations against the US war preparations. Instead, they are acting as accomplices of US imperialism by facilitating and encouraging the nationalist attacks on China.

The Labour Party has, over the past decade, been at the centre of an expansion of military relations with the US, which were downgraded in the 1980s by Washington after the NZ government banned visits by nuclear-armed US ships to New Zealand ports. In 1999 the so-called “left wing” Alliance and the Greens demanded that New Zealand troops be dispatched to East Timor as part of the Australian-led military intervention. In 2001, the Labour-led government committed elite SAS troops to the invasion of Afghanistan and subsequently joined in the bloody occupation of Iraq. The Alliance voted in parliament to endorse the Afghan operation with the Greens protesting only that it needed the imprimatur of the United Nations. The “normalisation” of defence relations was consummated in 2010 with the signing of the Wellington Declaration by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. This, in turn, has opened the door to the recent resumption of joint US-NZ military exercises, as the Obama administration intensifies its pressure on China.

New Zealand workers and young people must reject entirely the reactionary nostrums of nationalism and chauvinism, including the anti-Chinese variety being promoted by the Labour Party and its pseudo-left allies, and turn to the only program that represents the interests of the New Zealand working class—the internationalist and socialist perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International. This requires the fight to unite New Zealand workers with their class brothers and sisters in China, the US, throughout the Asia-Pacific and the world, in the common struggle against the capitalist profit system.

The author also recommends:

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[11 May 2012]

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