

NZ Labour leadership contest signals a party in crisis

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Three candidates—Grant Robertson, David Cunliffe and Shane Jones—are contesting a ballot for the vacant position of the leader of the New Zealand Labour Party, with voting due to conclude tomorrow.

The three-week campaign was triggered by the August 22 resignation of David Shearer. Shearer had failed to lift the party's dismal media poll ratings since assuming the leadership in 2011 and was heading toward a divisive national party conference in November and another likely electoral disaster in 2014.

Shearer's resignation highlights the profound crisis wracking the Labour Party, a product of the widespread hostility toward the party that has developed over three decades among its former social base in the working class.

Labour's collapse of support follows two lengthy periods in office, 1984–1989 and 1999–2008, during which it carried out the reactionary pro-market agenda of big business. The last Labour government, led by Helen Clark, was dumped in 2008 with just 34 percent of the popular vote, 11 points behind the National Party.

At the 2011 election, despite the National government's far reaching assault on workers, Labour received just 27 percent of the vote, its worst result in 80 years. In another sign of popular disaffection, the turnout of 74 percent of those eligible was the lowest since 1887.

In opposition, Labour has expressed no fundamental differences with Prime Minister John Key's government. National's austerity agenda has resulted in sweeping asset sales program and stepped-up attacks on jobs, living standards, health and education.

Under Shearer, Labour lurched even further to the right. It joined the Greens and the right-wing populist NZ First party in whipping up anti-Chinese sentiment over Chinese land purchases and recently proposed that foreigners be blocked from buying property, supposedly to halt soaring house prices.

Shearer resigned following widespread protests against deeply unpopular legislation giving wide powers to the security services to spy on the population. Labour did not oppose the new law as such, but proposed only cosmetic changes, purportedly to ensure greater oversight.

The leadership contest is being conducted under new rules adopted following a bitter debate at the 2012 party conference, which reduced the power of the parliamentary caucus. The leadership is now decided by a vote weighted to allocate 40 percent to the party membership, 40 percent to the caucus and 20 percent to six affiliated trade unions.

There has been a presidential-style selection race, with the candidates addressing membership meetings and union gatherings. These stage-managed affairs, fawned over by the media, were designed to create an atmosphere of "rejuvenation" among the party's vastly depleted ranks.

The candidates boast of addressing 4,000 members at meetings over the past three weeks. This, however, only underlines the precipitous decline of Labour's base, from nearly 60,000 in the 1980s under the Lange Labour government to less than 10,000. Labour no longer has the active support of the working class—it is an electoral apparatus for the parliamentary aspirations of union bureaucrats and sections of the middle class.

Labour's six union affiliates, which are themselves discredited by their decades of betrayal, are attempting to mobilise non-party union members—most of whom are deeply alienated from the Labour Party—in the selection process. Four unions endorsed Cunliffe as their preferred candidate, while the Service and Food Workers Union called on its branches to hold worksite meetings to discuss and vote on the leadership.

Each of the contenders has sought to distance himself from Shearer and Labour's record in government, claiming to stand for a return to "traditional Labour values." This harks back to the country's first Labour

government, which took office at the height of the 1930s Depression and implemented limited social reforms to head off emerging political and social upheavals. Invoking this political heritage is part of the attempts by the three candidates to appeal to the working class. It is also a pledge to the ruling class that they are committed to propping up capitalism in the current global crisis.

All three are right-wing bourgeois politicians with ties to the former Clark government and its attacks on the working class. Robertson, Shearer's deputy, was previously a diplomat and ministerial adviser to Clark. Cunliffe was commerce minister in Clark's government. Jones, also a member of the Clark cabinet, entered politics from the chairmanship of the Maori Fisheries Commission.

On TV One's "Q and A" program on September 1, all the candidates emphasised their commitment to the "market" economy, saying that the role of government is to be an "active partner" to big business. Stressing his background as a corporate consultant, Cunliffe enumerated pro-business policies around taxation, research and regional development. Robertson stated that Labour has a lot in common with NZ First, as well as the Greens and that he could work with either.

All three have assured big business that they can be relied on to implement the next stage of the austerity agenda. None have promised to change Labour's previous agreement not to reverse any of National's job cuts, school closures in Christchurch and its increase to the regressive Goods and Service Tax. On foreign policy, the candidates have all declared their support for a US-led strike against Syria.

However, such is the hostility in the working class to Labour that the candidates have felt compelled to make empty promises to lift living standards. Cunliffe and Robertson have endorsed a "living wage" campaign by the unions, promising to lift the minimum wage for government workers to \$18.40 per hour and the national minimum wage from \$13.75 to \$15 per hour.

Cunliffe made a hypocritical show of concern about child poverty and struggling families, while Robertson made a pitch on the basis of identity politics, promising to ensure that 50 percent of Labour MPs after the next election would be women. Both pledged to do away with National's employment law changes, including the 90-day probation period for new hires. Jones promised to restore the party's connections with its alienated "traditional" supporters.

The contenders have relied on various apologists for

Labour from the middle-class radical milieu to give this fraudulent process credibility. Columnist Chris Trotter, who in 2011 backed Shearer, has now anointed Cunliffe as the most "left-wing" candidate. Writing in the *Dominion Post* on August 30, Trotter declared that Cunliffe understands that the financial crash of 2008 shattered the "market-led" policies of the previous period, on which there had been the "broad consensus" between both National and Labour-led governments.

In fact, the "market-led" policies that were initiated by the Lange Labour government, and produced an endless assault on the living standards of workers, were a product of the globalisation of production that shattered any basis for national economic regulation and limited social reforms. Whoever is chosen as leader, Labour, like National, remains committed to ensuring the "competitiveness" of New Zealand capitalism at the expense of the working class.

The pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation (ISO) also openly supported Cunliffe, promoting the dangerous illusion that his victory "would push Labour, to some extent, to the Left, and has the chance to raise expectations beyond the party." The ISO and other pseudo-left organisations function as political defenders of Labour and the unions, in order to block the development of an independent movement of the working class based on an internationalist and socialist alternative.

These efforts to revive the political fortunes of the Labor Party reflect broader concerns in ruling circles over the stability of parliamentary rule itself, amid profound alienation from all the major parties. In conditions where mass struggles have already erupted in Egypt, Europe and elsewhere in response to austerity measures, the New Zealand political establishment is acutely aware that whichever party comes to power after the 2014 election will be compelled to deepen the assault on the working class.



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