

New Zealand: Mana Party seeks unity with right-wing Maori Party

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Leading members of the “opposition” Maori nationalist Mana Party and the right-wing Maori Party met in October to begin formulating shared “flagship policies” for the 2014 New Zealand election. While the Maori Party is currently rejecting an outright merger, the parties will formally meet again before Christmas.

The talks are a devastating exposure of the reactionary politics of Mana and its pseudo-left affiliates—the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), Fightback and Socialist Aotearoa. Since Mana was formed in 2011, after its leader and member of parliament Hone Harawira split from the Maori Party, the pseudo-lefts have promoted it as “pro-worker” and “leftwing.” In reality, both Mana and Maori are capitalist parties based on racial identity politics, which promote divisions within the working class and subordinates Maori workers to a privileged layer of tribal and business leaders.

The Maori Party was formed in 2004 following a split with the then Labour government, which opposed tribal claims to the foreshore and seabed. It is now thoroughly discredited in the working class for entering into coalition with the conservative National Party government following the 2008 election. The Maori Party has been instrumental in imposing National’s brutal austerity agenda, including cutbacks to health and education, the destruction of thousands of public sector jobs and an increase in the regressive Goods and Services Tax.

Under conditions of deepening social crisis, particularly in his own Maori electorate in Northland, Harawira split in 2011 to found Mana as a new trap for politically alienated sections of the working class. While Harawira voted for all National anti-working class policies over the previous two years, he demagogically declared the Maori Party had “betrayed

the people who put it in power.”

With the talks now underway, Mana is again embracing the Maori Party. Harawira emphasised the parties’ fundamental agreement, telling Maori Television on October 5: “I know they have the best interests of our people at heart, as do I ... We must unite.” Mana’s president, Annette Sykes, said the first meeting was “really positive and productive” and the two parties would work together to build an “independent Maori voice in Parliament.” Sykes told TV3 she had “the greatest respect” for Maori Party co-leaders Tariana Turia and Te Ururoa Flavell, and former leader Pita Sharples, describing them as “long time advocates for Maori ... and social justice issues.”

In fact, Sharples is the minister for Maori affairs and associate minister for corrections and education, while Turia is associate minister for health, housing, social development and tertiary education. They are directly responsible for devastating the living standards of the Maori and entire working class. One in five Maori households and one in three children live in poverty. Maori unemployment is officially 12.2 percent, double the overall rate. Maori suffer disproportionate rates of incarceration and diseases associated with poverty, such as rheumatic fever.

Meanwhile the tribal elites control about \$37 billion in business assets—up from \$9 billion in 2001. The Maori Party, working with National, ensured that this layer profited from the economic crisis. It devised the Whanau Ora policy, which privatised the delivery of welfare services to benefit Maori trusts, and backed the opening of for-profit charter schools and privately run prisons, provided that tribal businesses were involved.

Mana supports the Whanau Ora scheme, and Harawira recently welcomed the establishment of Maori-run charter schools in his impoverished northern

electorate.

The unity discussions are driven in part by concerns within both parties that they could lose seats to Labour. In the Maori electorate of Ikaroa-Rawhiti, Labour's candidate won a June by-election with 40 percent of the vote, while Mana got 26 percent and the Maori Party 20 percent. Mana's founding chairman Matt McCarten, who heads the Unite trade union, told Newstalk ZB: "[B]etween them they can beat Labour but divided they can't."

More fundamentally, Mana's call for unity with a widely despised party signals that it wants to take a more direct role in government, and is readying itself to impose the next stage of the austerity agenda demanded by big business. Supported by the pseudo-lefts, Mana is positioning itself as a "left" coalition partner for Labour and the Greens—both of which are just as committed as National to forcing workers to pay for the economic crisis.

The pseudo-left organisations claim there is a difference between Mana and the Maori Party. For instance, Fightback (previously the Workers Party) declared that the Maori Party was "unquestionably pro-capitalist" but hailed Mana as a "genuinely progressive" alternative, with a "leadership of genuine working class activists and Maori sovereignty activists."

Mana's policies, however, are just as rightwing and pro-business as the Maori Party's. They include calls for "much greater investment" by the government in "sustainable Maori businesses" and "establishing a fund to assist small businesses become medium or larger businesses, providing they are kept in New Zealand ownership." Mana advocates discrimination against immigrants via a policy to "prioritise the employment of New Zealand residents."

Both parties call for "Maori sovereignty," which means in practice increased payments to tribes through the Treaty of Waitangi settlement process. Successive Labour and National governments have given hundreds of millions of dollars to tribes, ostensibly to redress the crimes of British colonialism. The real purpose was to cultivate a wealthy layer of Maori to act as a buffer against the Maori working class, which gained nothing from the payouts.

While the pseudo-lefts portray Mana as "anti-privatisation," last year it joined the Maori Party in

supporting legal action by the Maori Council, representing tribal business interests, to secure shares in the electricity companies. The pseudo-lefts acted as cheerleaders for the Council. The ISO absurdly declared that by taking the government to court "Maoridom's elite weighed in on the side of the working class."

Mana and the pseudo-lefts also worked with Labour, the Greens and the anti-immigrant NZ First to divert popular anger over government asset sales into a chauvinist campaign against Chinese investment. Harawira called on people who were "pissed off at the Chinese buying our land" to join protests under the nationalist slogan "Aotearoa [New Zealand] is Not for Sale."

The pseudo-lefts have allied themselves to Mana to boost their own position within the political establishment, offering their services to promote Maori nationalism as "progressive" and block a unified movement of the working class to fight for its independent class interests. They do not represent the working class, but affluent middle class layers, including Maori entrepreneurs, union bureaucrats and academics.

While these outfits have remained silent on the Mana-Maori Party talks, there are indications they would support a merger. In January, Fightback and Mana member Grant Brookes wrote that "it seems good politics [for Harawira] to be advocating unity," adding that the "obstacle" was the current Maori Party leadership. He rejected suggestions that Mana had "sold out its principles" by calling for unity.

The moves towards regroupment by Mana and the Maori Party are a warning: should Mana join the next government, it will help deepen the assault on the working class. Workers and young people can only prepare for the coming struggles by breaking from Labour, the Greens, Mana and their pseudo-left apologists, and forming their own party, based on an international socialist program.



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