

# New Zealand Labour leader appoints new chief of staff

John Braddock  
11 March 2014

New Zealand's opposition Labour Party leader, David Cunliffe, announced the appointment of Matt McCarten on February 26 to a pivotal position as his chief of staff. McCarten, leader of the Unite union and founding chairman of the Maori nationalist Mana Party, split from the Labour Party in 1989. He has a long history of promoting bogus "left" formations to block any independent movement by the working class.

McCarten's appointment signals the consolidation of an electoral bloc behind Labour, consisting of the Greens, Mana and the right-wing, anti-immigrant NZ First, and the integration of the various pseudo-left organisations in this line-up. The pseudo-lefts—Fightback, Socialist Aotearoa and the International Socialist Organisation (ISO)—are all part of the Mana Party.

While the immediate aim is to boost Labour's prospects in elections due in September, this Labour-led bloc is directed more fundamentally at diverting into safe parliamentary channels the deep-seated alienation in the working class from the entire political establishment. McCarten's appointment provides Labour with badly needed "left" window dressing, and longstanding political connections to its potential allies.

The Labour Party faces the prospect of a third consecutive election rout. A TVNZ poll last month registered 51 percent for the ruling National Party, enough for it to govern alone. Labour was still floundering on 34 percent, with no improvement on its 2011 electoral result, which was its lowest vote in 80 years. Nearly a million voters, mostly working people, did not vote in 2011.

Cunliffe was installed as leader last September in a desperate attempt to overcome the profound hostility in the working class toward Labour. His attempts to distance himself from Labour's pro-business record,

particularly under the 1984–89 Lange Labour government's restructuring, are entirely bogus. Cunliffe was a cabinet minister in the 1999–2008 Labour government, which deepened the assault on the social position of working people. Last week, the media revealed that Cunliffe's campaign for the Labour leadership was secretly funded by several big business backers.

McCarten's appointment followed criticism of Cunliffe's failure to raise Labour's electoral stocks. Pro-Labour columnist Chris Trotter warned on the union-sponsored *Daily Blog* on February 19 that a "tipping point" had been reached, and Labour was heading toward "collapse." McCarten, touted as the country's "leading left wing campaigner," was suddenly brought forward as a "game breaker," in an attempt to bolster Labour's position.

At a press conference to announce the appointment, McCarten and Cunliffe lauded each other. McCarten declared that Cunliffe had "given our people hope." He was "a man who could be and should be the next prime minister." Cunliffe extolled McCarten's "lifetime of service to the cause of working people and the under-privileged."

McCarten has "a lifetime of service" in defending capitalism by establishing political safety valves to divert unrest in the working class. He played a central role in the 1989 Labour Party split that led to the formation of NewLabour amid widespread anger over the Lange Labour government's privatisations and budget cuts. He served as NewLabour president until 1991 when it joined with three other minor parties, including the Greens, to form the Alliance.

McCarten's pro-imperialist credentials were demonstrated during the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. He was organisational leader of

the Alliance, which, as a junior partner in Helen Clark's Labour government, voted to commit NZ troops. Following the Alliance's almost immediate implosion, McCarten became the director of the Unite trade union, which has been instrumental in stifling opposition among highly-exploited young workers in the fast-food industry.

In a recent interview on Radio Waatea, McCarten stressed that he saw no problem working with big business, pointing to his trade union experience. He said that as head of Unite "we reach agreements with employers all the time, that's what we do." McCarten revealed he had already received calls from business groups "who want to have a meeting with me."

In 2005, McCarten worked as a campaign advisor to the right-wing Maori Party, which went into coalition with the current National Party government in 2008 and has supported all its attacks on workers' living standards. He played a key role in founding Mana, which split from the Maori Party in 2011. While Mana is promoted as "left wing" by the pseudo-left outfits, it represents similar indigenous business interests to the Maori Party.

Mana president Annette Sykes signalled that McCarten's appointment will cement relations with Labour. She declared McCarten was "committed to the same broad goals as Mana" and told Radio Waatea his appointment was a "win-win for both of us," i.e., Labour and Mana. Sykes also indicated her willingness to work in a coalition with the anti-immigrant NZ First, saying she had no "difficulty with a number of the policies that NZ First promotes." Mana's policies discriminate against immigrants by calling for state-owned and Maori companies to "prioritise the employment of New Zealand residents."

McCarten's links to Mana provide the means for drawing the pseudo-left organisations more closely behind Labour. Fightback, Socialist Aotearoa and the ISO had already rallied behind Cunliffe, promoting the illusion that his leadership would push the party to the left. (See: "New Zealand pseudo-lefts promote new Labour leader")

All the pseudo-left organisations regard McCarten's appointment as an opportunity to integrate themselves more fully into the political establishment. An ISO article welcomed his selection as a means of reviving illusions in parliamentary politics. It hailed McCarten

as a "good guy" who had "dedicated his life to the working class" and who could convince people to vote. "If Labour can create an interest in the elections, it will be to Mana's gain," the ISO declared. "Our competition in this election is not the Labour Party or the Greens. It is disillusionment with voting itself."

Mike Treen, a Unite union official politically aligned with Socialist Aotearoa, wrote in the *Daily Blog* that the appointment would encourage "a campaign of the broader left" to elect a Labour-led administration that would "make decisions a bit more favourable to working people and a little less favourable to big business." In fact, a new Labour coalition government will only deepen the pro-war, pro-business agenda of the present National government at the expense of the working class.

Fightback praised McCarten's "formidable record" in building the Alliance, the Maori Party and Mana but sought to distance itself from his move to Labour. It declared that Mana's "role is to support the wider community movement, not to go into coalition with pro-capitalists." But Mana's leaders—whom Fightback fully supports—have made perfectly clear that they support Labour.

Amid widening class polarisation, the historic collapse of support for Labour raises, for the ruling elite, the danger that opposition within the working class to the established set-up will erupt outside its control. McCarten and the pseudo-lefts are performing a vital service for the bourgeoisie by trying to steer workers and youth back behind Labour and its parliamentary allies, the Greens and Mana, and forestall any revolutionary challenge to capitalist rule.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**