

New Zealand: Mana Party AGM endorses talks with Internet Party

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The proceedings of the Maori nationalist Mana Party's Annual General Meeting (AGM) last weekend demolish any claims that the party is somehow progressive or "left wing." In a significant further shift to the right, all seven party branches voted to allow the leadership to negotiate an alliance with the openly pro-business Internet Party, founded this year by multi-millionaire Kim Dotcom, to contest New Zealand's September national election.

There was no public opposition from the trade union bureaucrats and middle class pseudo-left groups—the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), Fightback and Socialist Aotearoa—which are completely integrated into Mana. The pseudo-lefts will now seek to justify the party's sleazy electoral manoeuvring with the Internet Party.

Before the conference, Mana leader Hone Harawira told the media that discussions with Dotcom and other big-business figures showed that "Mana can no longer be pigeonholed as a party for Maori, the disaffected and for the radical fringe."

The sordid electoral alliance is intended to increase Mana's seats in parliament—it currently holds just one—while establishing a presence for the Internet Party. A significant attraction for Mana is the promise of funding from Dotcom for its campaign.

The deal comes amid widespread alienation from official politics, particularly among young and working class people, who have suffered a sharp decline in living standards. A recent OECD report found that since 2007 the number of New Zealanders struggling to afford food had increased from 10 to 17 percent. Support for the opposition Labour Party, which has no fundamental differences with the National Party government's brutal austerity measures, has not recovered since it lost the 2011 election by a landslide.

The extensive media coverage given to the "Mana-Dotcom" deal—including by so-called liberal commentators such as the union-funded *Daily Blog*—demonstrates that the ruling class considers the parties an important political safety valve for rising popular discontent.

Mana and the Internet Party describe themselves as "anti-

establishment" but both are thoroughly committed to the maintenance of the profit system. They are trying to channel popular discontent into support for a coalition government led by Labour, which would continue and deepen the National government's attacks on working people.

World Socialist Web Site reporters attended the open sessions of Mana's AGM on Saturday at Mataikotare Marae in Rotorua, where Dotcom was a guest of honour. He arrived with his entourage in a convoy of Porsche and Mercedes SUVs, accompanied by reporters from the country's major TV and radio networks and newspapers.

The German-born Dotcom is battling extradition to the United States on charges of copyright infringement by his former website Megaupload. He has become a major celebrity in New Zealand since the National government arrested him in 2012 on the orders of the US Justice Department. It was subsequently revealed that the state intelligence agency, the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB), illegally spied on him and more than 85 other New Zealand residents.

While the WSWs opposed the extradition operation and the anti-democratic activities of the GCSB, it gives no political support to the Internet Party, which has an openly pro-business agenda aimed at further integrating New Zealand capitalism into globalised finance and production.

In his speech to about 200 Mana members, and during a question-and-answer session, Dotcom called for policies to attract more Internet-based businesses and other investment to New Zealand and for a "more efficient government... [to] get things done faster, cheaper." He declared that "there's nothing wrong with success as long as you ... keep social fairness in mind."

Dotcom said he received a \$1 million low-interest loan from the German government to start his first business, Data Protect, and called for similar handouts for New Zealand business "innovators." He said the rich should "pay a little bit more" tax, adding that this should be restricted to "the top one percent, the biggest players in the country," so as not to "affect growth of new businesses."

Dotcom's references to "social fairness" and making the rich pay are simply window dressing. His orientation is to business, particularly his own, and to layers of the upper middle class. He has openly opposed some of Mana's limited social platform, including its calls for a financial transactions tax and the abolition of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). He declared that it was "a bit early to comment" on Mana's proposals for an increased minimum wage, and a so-called "universal basic income."

While speaking against "illegal spying by the GCSB," Dotcom certainly does not oppose the overall police-state apparatus that has been put in place. The Internet Party's "agenda" makes a vague call for "better oversight of spy agencies," not their abolition.

Far from opposing Dotcom, Mana members received him warmly and frequently applauded. Those who had previously expressed reservations about an alliance—ISO members and ex-Greens MP Sue Bradford—remained silent during a public question and answer session. A handful of delegates walked out before the final vote—ensuring a unanimous decision to proceed with negotiations. Mana leader Harawira told the media that Dotcom's appearance went "extremely well" and he was willing to compromise on policy "detail."

Speaking to the WWSWS, John Minto, who ran as Mana's candidate for mayor of Auckland last year, expressed the crass electoral calculations that lie behind the negotiations. He described the Internet Party as an "unashamedly capitalist party" representing "big business," but added that he saw "potential advantages in [an alliance] if it gets greater publicity for Mana and Mana's policies."

Minto defended Mana's support for the Labour Party, to "change the government," despite admitting that Labour was "wedded to neo-liberalism" and the military alliance with the US. He also defended Mana's attempt last year to reunite with the right-wing Maori Party, which is part of the current National government. Minto declared that "Mana members are saying we want unity ... and we made every effort to do that."

Harawira founded Mana in 2011 after splitting from the Maori Party, which had become discredited in the eyes of the working class for going into coalition with the National Party in 2008 and helping to impose its attacks on working people, including an increase in the regressive GST and thousands of job cuts. Harawira supported collaboration with National and voted for its anti-working class policies for two years before declaring that the Maori Party had "betrayed" its base.

In fact, Mana and the Maori Party seek to divide the working class along ethnic lines and tie Maori workers to their "own" tribal and business elites, on the basis of racial

"unity." The only difference between them is that Mana, which maintains a charade of social concern for the workers and the poor, prefers to work with Labour and the Greens, rather than National.

The class orientation of Mana was on display at the party's AGM—aptly described by a *New Zealand Herald* reporter as the "Mataikotare Millionaire's Club." Those present included Maori broadcaster and businessman Willie Jackson; former Labour MP Georgina Beyer; multi-millionaire investment banker Gareth Morgan; and prominent Maori nationalist Donna Awatere Huata, a former member of the extreme pro-market ACT Party who was convicted in 2005 for stealing \$80,000 from a government-funded charity that she operated.

Awatere Huata was last year elected to the Maori Council, an elite body that has sought, with Mana's backing, to secure shares for tribal businesses in electricity companies being privatised by the government.

Jackson, a former member of the now-defunct "left" Alliance Party, runs the National Urban Maori Authority (NUMA), which has received tens of millions of dollars from the government as part of the Whanau Ora scheme. This scheme, devised by the Maori Party and supported by Mana, privatised the delivery of some welfare services to benefit Maori trusts like NUMA.

Morgan, one of New Zealand's wealthiest individuals, called for a modest increase in tax on the rich, as well as the abolition of every welfare benefit in the country, replacing them with a "universal basic income" of \$11,000—about the same as the current poverty-level unemployment benefit.

The entire AGM vindicated the analysis of the WWSWS that there is nothing remotely "socialist" about Mana and its pseudo-left affiliates. The intense media interest in Mana and possible alliance with the right-wing Internet Party reflects an understanding in ruling circles that such an "anti-establishment" formation is needed amid sharply rising social tensions—in order to block an independent movement of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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