

New Zealand government poaches senior Labour Party MP

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Shane Jones, a senior parliamentarian in the opposition Labour Party, announced on April 22 that he intended to quit politics, five months out from the New Zealand general election. He was a former housing minister and associate minister in charge of Treaty of Waitangi negotiations, immigration and trade in the 1999–2008 Labour government of Helen Clark. Jones was also one of the contenders in the party's leadership contest last September.

The sudden resignation came after Jones was tapped on the shoulder by Foreign Minister Murray McCully to take the position of "Pacific Economic Ambassador," created especially for him by the National Party government. In his new role, Jones will oversee the National Party's shift in foreign aid policy, from so-called "development" projects to providing venture capital for the region's business elites.

Jones brings well-honed commercial credentials to the job. Before entering parliament in 2005, he was chairman of the Treaty of Waitangi Fisheries Commission, which administered the allocation of fishing quotas to Maori businesses. He also oversaw the purchase of a half share in the country's biggest fishing company, Sealord, on behalf of Maori tribal interests.

While the wooing of Jones had clearly been going on for some time, the Labour Party appears to have been caught unprepared. Labour leader David Cunliffe could only complain that it was a "hell of a way" for the National Party to try to win the upcoming election.

The *New Zealand Herald*'s political editor John Armstrong described Jones's desertion as an "unmitigated disaster" for Labour. There was only one conclusion to be drawn, Armstrong stated: "He thinks Labour cannot win the September general election." TV3's Patrick Gower claimed the resignation effectively severed Labour's main link to Winston

Peters, leader of the right-wing populist NZ First Party, who Labour had been courting as a possible coalition partner after the election.

The sleazy affair exacerbates the crisis engulfing Labour, which is facing its third consecutive electoral rout following losses to National in 2008 and 2011. Despite widespread antipathy to the National government's austerity measures, large sections of workers regard Labour as no different. In the wake of last September's leadership change, and a phony shift to the "left" under Cunliffe, the party's poll ratings have continued to plummet.

Jones initially justified his decision to quit parliament, unconvincingly, as a purely personal one, saying: "I don't want to do it anymore." He took a parting shot at the Green Party, declaring that he could never have worked under Greens' co-leader Russell Norman in a coalition government. In contrast to the Greens, Jones said, he was "pro-industry" and "pro-development."

In one telling comment, Jones, who is Maori, declared that he had "defended this Labour Party in the front of my people for long enough." What Jones is referring to is not working-class Maori, who are vastly over-represented in social statistics such as unemployment, poverty and incarceration. Rather, the layer he represents is the Maori business elite and bureaucrats who feel that Labour had not done enough to advance their interests through multi-million dollar Treaty settlements and racially-based "advancement" programs.

Jones now joins several other Maori politicians, including Maori Party leaders Tariana Turia and Pita Sharples, and National MP Tau Henare, who are quitting politics at this election after participating in the National government's assault on the living standards

of the working class—Maori and non-Maori alike.

Jones received a gushing accolade from Mana Party leader and MP Hone Harawira, who described him as a “wonderfully gifted and captivating speaker and the best orator that parliament has ever seen.” Harawira is currently positioning Mana to fill the void left by Jones and others as representatives of the Maori business elite within the political establishment. The Mana leader also aims to become part of a Labour-led coalition after the election.

Jones’s resignation has laid bare bitter divisions between the so-called “right” and “left” factions of the Labour Party. Jones was a leading figure of the right. His departure was greeted with a declaration of “good riddance” by the union-sponsored *Daily Blog* website. Moderator Martyn Bradbury claimed that Jones had quit because he knew that under Cunliffe’s leadership “the change in direction beneath the surface [to the left]” was “real.”

There are no significant policy differences between the “right” and “left” of the Labour Party, which implemented the pro-market restructuring agenda of big business in the 1980s under David Lange and again under Helen Clark from 1999 to 2008. Amid intense hostility from the working class, Labour is a hollowed-out organisation and nothing more than a vehicle for political careerists. The Labour factions rest on the competing interests of sections the trade union apparatus and layers of the upper middle class.

The main differences within the Labour hierarchy are over how to best fend off electoral oblivion. The present leadership under Cunliffe is desperately seeking to build an electoral bloc behind Labour, consisting of the Greens, the Maori nationalist Mana Party and the right-wing, anti-immigrant NZ First.

In contesting the leadership last year, Jones adopted a somewhat different posture. He distanced himself from Labour’s preoccupation with various forms of identity politics based on race, gender and sexual preferential and environmental issues, and promised to restore Labour’s connection with its “traditional” supporters. At the same time, he advocated an extension of the pro-business economic agenda. He particularly sought to stir up reactionary nationalist sentiment, criticising the universities for admitting too many “foreign” students, and forcing a Commerce Commission investigation into the “Australian-owned” Countdown supermarket

chain for its treatment of suppliers and customers.

However, there is no significant difference between the rival Labour camps. Two days before Jones’s resignation, it was revealed that, like Cunliffe, his leadership campaign had been financed by leading businessmen. Jones’s backers included Wira Gardiner, a prominent National Party Maori figurehead and husband of education minister Hekia Parata, and NZ Oil and Gas board member Rodger Finlay.

Cunliffe, while feigning concern about child poverty, has assured the financial elite that Labour will implement its agenda. He consistently emphasises his commitment to the “market” economy, saying that the role of government is as an “active partner” to big business. Cunliffe has studiously avoided making any promises to reverse any of National’s deeply unpopular policies.

Labour has, moreover, signalled its intention to extend the National’s assault on living standards by calling for the retirement age to be lifted from 65 years to 67. Finance spokesman David Parker recently announced a major new policy to allow the Reserve Bank to adjust KiwiSaver retirement contributions, rather than interest rates, to control inflation. The plan would make KiwiSaver compulsory and increase contribution rates, pushing working people even further into hardship.

Jones’s departure from parliament for a position made to order by the National government underscores the fact that both major parties not only defend the existing capitalist order, but are interchangeable and have virtually identical anti-working class policies.



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