

NZ opposition parties wage xenophobic campaign against Asian immigrants

Tom Peters
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Over the past month, New Zealand's main opposition Labour Party, the Greens, the Maori nationalist Mana Party and the right-wing NZ First Party, have intensified their xenophobic campaign to restrict immigration, particularly from China and other Asian countries. The parties are seeking to make this a central issue in the lead-up to the September election.

Labour, which lost the 2011 election by a landslide, is floundering in the polls and widely seen as no different to the conservative National Party government. Since National was first elected in 2008 it has implemented a series of brutal austerity measures to impose the global economic crisis on working people, leading to soaring living costs and increasing poverty and inequality. Labour essentially agrees with the government's attacks—including thousands of public sector job cuts, health and education cuts, and an increase in the regressive Goods and Services Tax.

Now Labour and its allies are whipping up hostility to immigrants, blaming them for the deepening crisis, particularly the soaring cost of housing. New Zealand has the least affordable rents and the second least affordable houses among developed nations, according to the OECD—the outcome of unrestrained investor speculation, coupled with the destruction of thousands of houses by the 2011 Christchurch earthquake.

Speaking to TV3 on May 26, Labour leader David Cunliffe blamed migrants for putting pressure on “our housing, our schools and our hospitals.” Treasury expects net immigration of 40,000 people this year. Cunliffe told Fairfax Media on May 19 that this would be cut in half under Labour and immigrant numbers could be “managed” to as low as 5,000 a year in the future.

The provocative nature of this policy is underscored by the fact that one quarter of New Zealand's 4.5

million residents were born overseas. In the biggest city, Auckland, the figure is 39.1 percent, or half a million people. The percentage of NZ residents of Asian ethnicity has almost doubled since 2001 to 11.8 percent.

The anti-immigrant campaign is primarily an attack on those from China—the biggest group of new arrivals last year. The campaign dovetails with the opposition parties' recent attacks on the government's business ties with China, New Zealand's number one export market.

This reflects pressure from Washington, NZ's closest military ally, for the country to align more closely with the Obama administration's aggressive “pivot to Asia”—aimed at militarily encircling China and containing its economic rise. There is increasing support within the NZ ruling elite for a more explicit embrace of the US, as the Australian government has done.

An April 27 front-page article in the *Sunday Star Times* quoted strategic analyst Paul Buchanan, who described the government's attempts to balance between the US and China as “untenable.” He stated: “At some point New Zealand will be forced to choose between its trading relationship with [China] and its security relationship with the US.”

Like other US allies in the region—including Australia, Japan, the Philippines and South Korea—NZ has strengthened its military and intelligence ties with the US in recent years. The 1999–2008 Labour government played the key role by sending troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. Along with the National government, Labour and the Greens have called for military action against Syria and supported the US-funded coup in Ukraine.

In 2012 Mana, NZ First, Labour and the Greens

worked together to divert popular anger over government asset sales into a chauvinist campaign against the sale of a few farms to a Chinese company. Mana leader Hone Harawira called on people who were “pissed off with the Chinese buying our land” to join protests under the nationalist slogan “Aotearoa [New Zealand] is Not for Sale.”

This year the opposition parties and corporate media have fuelled “corruption” scandals centred on government ministers Judith Collins and Maurice Williamson. Collins is accused of using her position to help meat and dairy exporter Oravida raise its profile in China. Her husband, Chinese New Zealander David Wong-Tung, is a director of the company. Williamson resigned as building and construction minister on May 1, after revelations that he tried to influence a police investigation into Donghua Liu, a wealthy Chinese businessman and National Party donor who was arrested on domestic violence allegations.

Pro-Labour columnist Chris Trotter wrote on the trade union funded *Daily Blog* on May 7 that the scandals surrounding Collins and Williamson showed the “disproportionate amount of national power and influence” wielded by Chinese immigrants. He suggested that some Chinese-New Zealanders wanted Auckland to “become a Chinese financial enclave and entrepot dominated by local agents of the vast (and globally expanding) Chinese diaspora.”

The tone for this xenophobic rhetoric is set by NZ First, a right-wing populist party founded in 1993 on a platform of restricting Asian immigration. Its leader Winston Peters has scapegoated Chinese migrants for a range of social issues, including crime, prostitution, gambling, unemployment, the cost of providing pensions, traffic congestion, as well as the housing shortage.

At a May 23 public meeting in Masterton, Peters claimed that Chinese donors to the National Party were demanding changes to immigration policy, and that New Zealand was becoming an economic colony of China and Australia. He declared that 21 of real estate company Barfoot & Thompson’s top 25 agents were Asian, and held up a Chinese-language brochure advertising properties in Auckland.

Labour and its allies have largely adopted the positions of NZ First, which Labour is courting as a potential partner in a coalition government.

Daily Blog Wellington May 6, the leader

member John Minto called for restrictions on employers hiring “cheaper, *more compliant* workers from overseas, both in Europe and Asia” (emphasis added). He added that New Zealanders should be “outraged” at foreigners investing in the housing market. He claimed, absurdly, that these positions were not “xenophobic or racist” but “simply about self-respect.”

Another *Daily Blog* writer and Mana supporter, Tim Selwyn, ranted on the *Tumeke* website that Prime Minister John Key was “steeped in cringing colonial subservience” and his government was “in the pockets of the Chinese.”

Middle class pseudo-left organisations, the International Socialist Organisation, Fightback and Socialist Aotearoa, which are part of Mana and will campaign for it in the election, have not criticised these statements thereby indicating their support.

Trotter, Selwyn and NZ First all turn reality on its head. China is a cheap labour platform operating within a financial and political framework dominated by the US, Japan and European powers. Corporations based in these countries take the lion’s share of the profits extracted from the Chinese working class.

Depicting Chinese immigrants as a new colonising force, intent on dominating NZ’s economy, provides the rationale to support the US build-up to war against China, or else take a neutral position. At the same time, the campaign reflects the material interests of layers of big business and the petty bourgeoisie, including the Maori elite represented by Mana, who see foreign investors as rivals.

Mana’s statements are further proof that there is nothing remotely progressive about the party, which uses national chauvinism and racial identity politics to divide the working class and block any challenge to the capitalist system.



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