

New Zealand Labour Party congress silent on war preparations

John Braddock, Tom Peters

14 July 2014

New Zealand's opposition Labour Party held a congress in Wellington on July 5–7, in preparation for the September 20 national election. The most notable feature of the event was the absence of any public discussion of Labour's support for the National Party government's *de facto* military alliance with Washington, and for US war plans against China.

While speaker after speaker repeated meaningless platitudes about "the fair go and the chance for all," the reality is that Labour shares National's agenda of austerity, militarism and attacks on democratic rights.

The blanket of silence imposed on these critical issues indicates they will be expunged from the coming election campaign. Behind the backs of voters, and with the support of all the establishment parties, the ruling elite has moved in behind the advanced US military build-up against China, threatening a regional and global conflagration.

During a visit to Washington last month, Prime Minister John Key further aligned New Zealand with the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," aimed at strengthening US control over the Asia-Pacific region and encircling China.

None of this was discussed publicly at Labour's congress, but in a July 6 interview with Radio NZ, Labour's foreign affairs spokesman David Shearer stated that "with the United States wary of [China's] expansion... we've evolved as being a much more strategic partner in the Pacific." He described this as "a very good position, a very good place to be."

For the past two years Labour and its allies—the Greens, the Maori nationalist Mana Party and the right-wing populist NZ First—have pushed for a closer alignment with the US against China. The parties are all campaigning against Chinese investment and have exploited concerns over spiralling housing costs to

demand restrictions on immigration.

During the congress, Labour leader David Cunliffe confirmed to the media that he intends to form a government in coalition with NZ First, whose leader Winston Peters frequently delivers xenophobic rants against Chinese immigrants.

Labour also supports the re-emergence of Japanese imperialism. The day after the congress, Cunliffe met Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who was visiting New Zealand to secure backing for his government's militarist "reinterpretation" of the constitution to allow Japanese forces to join wars, supposedly in defence of allies. Cunliffe described the talks with Abe as "very positive."

The only mention of foreign policy at Labour's congress was in a speech by Australian Labor leader Bill Shorten, who has close ties to Washington and held key posts in the Labor government that unconditionally endorsed Obama's "pivot," agreed to station US marines in Darwin and gave the US greater access to Australian naval and air bases.

Shorten, the first Australian Labor leader to address a NZ Labour congress, noted that it was almost 100 years since Australian and New Zealand troops landed at Gallipoli during World War I as part of the British Empire's invading force. He declared that the First and Second World Wars had "deep meaning" for both countries and that "our two great nations ... have always punched above our weight in international matters."

The New Zealand and Australian governments, supported by the opposition parties, are both spending hundreds of millions of dollars to glorify the First World War, in a deliberate drive to overcome widespread anti-war sentiment and condition public opinion in preparation for future imperialist wars.

The congress was held against the backdrop of a collapse in support for Labour in the working class. Labour is currently polling below 30 percent and faces electoral oblivion. Cunliffe's installation as leader last September—an attempt to give the party a "left" face—has failed to turn around its political fortunes.

At the 2011 election, over 800,000 people, or 31 percent of registered voters, refused to vote. It was the lowest turnout in more than a century. For the ruling elite, the unprecedented alienation from Labour, and from the political establishment as a whole, presents the very real danger that opposition to austerity and militarism could erupt outside the control of the major parties.

Thus all the speakers felt compelled to make hypocritical and unconvincing expressions of concern for the deepening social crisis, for which Labour and National are equally culpable.

In his congress speech, Cunliffe verbally distanced himself from the 1984–90 Labour governments' program of what he called "trickle-down economics—neoliberalism." He pointed out that between 1984 and 2011, the incomes of the top 1 percent rose nearly 10 times as fast as the bottom 10 percent.

"Today our society is more unequal than it has ever been," Cunliffe declared. He listed some of the statistics: 285,000 or one in four children in poverty, 42,000 additional unemployed since 2008, 46 percent of workers without a pay rise last year, median incomes declining.

But Labour announced nothing to seriously address this crisis. A handful of proposed meagre "reforms" include raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour from \$14.25, and a rise in the top income tax rate from 33 to 36 percent. Labour will retain National's increase to the regressive Goods and Services Tax.

A much-touted policy to reduce school class sizes by three students will be funded by axing the government's pay incentives for "lead teachers," with no significant increase in education spending. Other key policies are specifically designed to stimulate corporate profit, including a promise to build 100,000 houses over 10 years and sell them at "market rates"—which will do nothing to resolve the housing affordability crisis.

Labour's economic prescription is essentially

identical to National's austerity program. It accepts the government's \$1.5 billion annual cap on new spending, meaning Labour would have to cut funding in many, so far unidentified, areas. The party has repeatedly attacked the government from the right for failing to increase the pension age and carry out deeper spending cuts to reduce debt.

Labour's congress charade was aimed at concealing the fact that whichever party leads wins the September 20 election, the next government will impose the deepening economic crisis on working people, and stand ready to drag the country into US-led wars, in order to protect the wealth and predatory neo-colonial interests of the New Zealand ruling class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact