

New Zealand parties express sham concern for the poor

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The campaign for today's general election in New Zealand has been characterised by the suppression of all the major issues confronting the working class—the drive to war, austerity and attacks on democratic rights. The contending parties have sought to outdo each other in offering their services to big business to impose the next round of attacks on public services, jobs and living standards.

Any occasional expressions of concern about the plight of the poor, children in particular, have been simply to camouflage the corporate agenda, to which all parties are committed. The hypocrisy of the entire political establishment was underscored at one of the few election events on the issue of poverty, which took place in Wellington on Tuesday. The meeting, featuring speakers from most political parties, was sponsored by the NZ Council of Christian Social Services and attracted an audience of about 150.

The framework of the discussion was set by the chairman, Max Rashbrooke, a journalist and well-known “poverty” publicist, who invoked the concern of “international bodies” such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and “even organisations like Standard and Poor's” that social inequality was a “huge problem.” Neither Rashbrooke nor any of the other speakers made the basic point that these institutions are responsible for imposing the agenda of pro-market restructuring that has widened the gulf between rich and poor internationally.

Far from being a debate, the platform had the character of a club. Each speaker professed sympathy for the poor and offered election promises, knowing full well that even these limited band aids would not be carried out. The chatty, joking banter on the platform only underscored the point. In a rare moment of candour, Chris Auchinvole, a retiring National Party

MP, declared: “What you are going to hear is there is actually more in common between us than there is apart.”

The meeting chairman ensured that nothing was allowed to upset this cross-party unity. Discussion from the floor was strictly limited to “questions only.” Rather pointedly, WSWS representatives, who campaigned at previous forums chaired by Rashbrooke, were not given the call during question time.

The Labour Party's economic development spokesman Grant Robertson told the audience that he volunteered to spend a night in a nearby shelter for homeless men and learnt they all had “some aspirations.” He declared Labour would “put people back in the centre of monetary policy,” “set targets” and introduce “pro-people” taxes, such as a capital gains tax.

In fact, Labour's central finance policy plank is to return greater budget surpluses than the incumbent National government, which in turn will require further cuts to social spending. Labour has ruled out removing the regressive GST, and its proposed capital gains tax is chiefly geared to reining in property speculation. Labour has adopted overtly pro-business demands to push out the age of retirement to 67 years, increase compulsory superannuation payments and gut the public accident compensation scheme.

Candidates from the Greens and the Internet-Mana Party (IMP), both of which claim to be the only ones opposing child poverty, also displayed their pro-business programs. Greens candidate James Shaw, a former “environmental consultant” with the HSBC bank, said that to create employment the Greens would boost handouts to business for research and development, and “reduce company taxes and personal income taxes,” using revenue from a climate levy on

carbon emissions.

Ariana Paretutanganui-Tamati, the IMP candidate for the Rongotai electorate, highlighted her background in social work and the Maori business sector. She said the IMP would “buy back” the power companies partially privatised by the National government, a policy that would only line the pockets of investors. She promoted Mana’s “Feed the Kids” initiative to provide free meals for children in schools in low income areas. Mana leader Hone Harawira has previously emphasised the “affordability” of the measure, which will be restricted to the very poorest schools and use public funds to expand existing business-backed charity programs.

Paretutanganui-Tamati promoted the IMP’s plan to broaden business opportunities in IT and said the party would “revitalise New Zealand business by increasing incentives and grants to allow start-ups ... to generate jobs.” In what is now an IMP theme, she said German-born party founder and multi-millionaire Kim Dotcom was “given a million dollars from his government to develop his business ... that’s one of our approaches.”

The shameless character of the event was underscored by a large graph posted on the wall, charting the relentless rise of inequality over the past 30 years under all governments. The sharp increases in the 1980s and early 1990s was followed by a near continual rise until 2014. A minor and brief levelling was associated with Labour’s “Working for Families” (WFF) welfare package, which National has retained and is restricted to working households.

Labour candidate Robertson attempted to use the chart to blame National. However, Labour governments in the 1980s, and again from 1999 to 2008, with the support of the Greens, initiated and deepened the pro-market restructuring that devastated the living standards of the working class. At the same time, he declared that social inequality “isn’t a problem that gets solved straight away and it isn’t a problem that any one political party owns.” In other words, everybody and nobody—certainly none of the parties represented on the platform—is to be held responsible.

A new report by the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), released on September 9, found that child poverty has become “more entrenched and difficult to address” than ever over the past three years. Last year, 260,000 or 24 percent, of children were living under the

poverty line, set at 60 percent of the medium income after housing costs. Some 205,000 children are further below the poverty line than previously thought. Three out of five live in poverty for at least seven years. Wages have continued to decline to the extent that 40 percent of poor children live in households where one or both parents are in work. Long-term impacts on health, housing and education are severe.

Whichever parties take office after the election, the next government, confronted with deteriorating economic forecasts, will only deepen the assault on living standards, inevitably hitting the most vulnerable.



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