

New Zealand election: Labour's worst defeat in 92 years

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Saturday's national election in New Zealand resulted in a landslide victory for the incumbent conservative National Party government, giving it a third term in office. The main opposition Labour Party received just 24.7 percent of the vote, its worst result since 1922 and even lower than the 27 percent it received in the 2011 election. National's 48.1 percent was its best result since 1951.

At the same time, turnout was the third lowest in 100 years, reflecting the alienation of broad layers of the working class from all the parties, which share the same pro-business and militarist agenda. Approximately 77 percent of enrolled voters participated, slightly more than the 2011 figure of 74.2 percent, which was the lowest turnout since 1893. About one million eligible people abstained from voting, including 280,000 predominantly young people who did not enrol. This is roughly equivalent to the number who voted for National.

The election took place amid mounting economic instability globally and in New Zealand. The NZ economy expanded by 3.9 percent in the year to June, one of the highest growth rates recorded among developed countries. This is largely due to a temporary construction boom following the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, and agricultural exports to Asia. However prices for dairy products, the country's biggest export, have almost halved since February, mainly due to falling demand from China. The Treasury has slashed its forecasts for growth.

In response National, Labour and its main ally the Greens all campaigned on a strict spending limit and returning budget surpluses, inevitably at the expense of working people. Labour and the Greens both promised to retain National's increase to the regressive Goods and Services Tax (GST) and its cut to corporate tax. The Greens even proposed a further company tax cut to be funded by a carbon tax designed to benefit "sustainable" businesses.

Yesterday in interviews with TVNZ and TV3, former Labour leader David Shearer ludicrously blamed the party's defeat on "a group of people who wanted to take Labour to the extreme left" and lost the support of "centre" voters. Shearer was replaced last year by David Cunliffe in a desperate attempt to boost the party's support. Cunliffe was fraudulently promoted as "left wing" by liberal commentators, trade union bureaucrats and the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation.

The reality is that over the past six years of deeply unpopular austerity measures, Labour has offered no alternative. In 2011, when he was Labour's finance spokesman, Cunliffe declared that "under any government there would have to be cuts." Throughout the election campaign Cunliffe repeatedly praised National's response to the global financial crisis that erupted in 2008, which included the destruction of thousands of public sector jobs and cutbacks to healthcare, welfare and education.

While cynically expressing concern that almost one quarter of children live in poverty, Labour proposed nothing to seriously address the decline in real wages and the major increase in social inequality under successive National and Labour governments. Labour pledged to increase the minimum wage by a mere \$2 an hour, while lifting the retirement age from 65 to 67.

Predictably, pro-Labour commentators have slandered the working class as right wing or apathetic for failing to vote for the party. Martyn Bradbury, who runs the trade union funded *Daily Blog*, wrote: "I am speechless. I thought New Zealanders would react angrily at seeing the real [Prime Minister John] Key, they didn't."

Bradbury pointed to "the vile toxic politics exposed by *Dirty Politics*," journalist Nicky Hager's book which revealed the government's collusion with right-wing bloggers to smear political opponents—a practice common to all bourgeois parties. The book was used by the opposition and the media to pressure Justice Minister

Judith Collins to resign over her ties to blogger Cameron Slater.

Labour and its allies used the scandal to posture as a “clean” alternative to National. At the same time Labour, the Greens, the Maori nationalist Mana Party and NZ First all took part in a filthy campaign to whip up opposition to Chinese investment and to scapegoat immigrants for the lack of jobs and the high cost of housing.

Cunliffe courted NZ First as a potential coalition partner and declared that Labour had “a lot in common” with the party, which has opposed Asian immigration since it was founded 20 years ago. Since 2012 all the opposition parties have pushed for the government to cut business ties with China, NZ’s number one trading partner. The parties had previously called for Collins’ resignation over her links to Chinese business figures.

The opposition’s aim is to align the country more explicitly with Washington’s “pivot” to Asia—the Obama administration’s military encirclement and preparations for war against China.

While Labour and the Greens did not gain any additional votes from the xenophobic campaign, they helped NZ First to grow its share from 7 to 9 percent. At the same time, the recently formed Conservative Party—which adopted many of NZ First’s policies—got more than 4 percent.

Another *Daily Blog* column by Green MP Catherine Delahunty, published two days before the election, railed against “the apparent complicity of a sleepy hypnotised population [in]... not only global violence but also state surveillance without ethics, and dirty politics without shame.”

On September 15 journalist Glenn Greenwald and whistle-blower Edward Snowden presented evidence that NZ’s Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) collaborates with the US National Security Agency to spy indiscriminately on the communications of millions of ordinary citizens.

In fact, there is widespread opposition to mass surveillance. But Labour, the Greens and the Internet-Mana Party (IMP)—which hosted a large public meeting in Auckland where Snowden and Greenwald spoke—have no intention of dismantling the GCSB. The parties made vague calls for a “review” or an “inquiry” into the spy agency, which would undoubtedly keep all its anti-democratic powers intact.

All the parties demonstrated their support for Washington’s “global violence” by voting in parliament earlier this year for resolutions which endorsed the US-

backed coup in Ukraine and the American provocations against Russia. When Labour declared its support for US bombing of Iraq nine days before the election, the Greens and IMP remained silent.

The IMP was obliterated in the election, receiving less than 1.3 percent of the vote and losing the one seat it had in parliament. This was despite multi-millionaire Internet Party founder Kim Dotcom spending \$4 million on the IMP’s campaign.

The alliance between the Internet Party and the Maori nationalist Mana Party—which includes the middle class, pseudo-left groups the International Socialist Organisation, Fightback and Socialist Aotearoa—attempted to sell itself as “pro-poor.” But its policies to raise the minimum wage, introduce free university education and lunches in some schools were no more than window dressing for an openly pro-business agenda.

The IMP intended to support a Labour-led government and extract concessions for an upper-middle class layer, including cash handouts for tech entrepreneurs like Dotcom and increased payments from the state to indigenous tribal businesses.

The election result has made clear the vast gulf between all the established parties and the interests of workers and youth. The historic collapse of Labour, which was previously the main mechanism used by the ruling class to suppress workers’ struggles, means that future class struggles will take a more open and explosive form.



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