

New Zealand Labour leader resigns after election rout

John Braddock
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New Zealand's Labour Party leader David Cunliffe resigned last week following the party's worst election defeat in 92 years. At the September 20 poll, Labour gained only 24.7 percent of the vote, while the incumbent National Party returned to office with 48 percent.

Despite National's six-year record of attacks on jobs, living standards, public services and basic rights, and deepening social inequality, Labour has now lost three elections in a row by successively larger margins.

Cunliffe declared that he took "responsibility for a horrific election loss," but announced he will stand again in a fresh leadership ballot that will run until November 18.

Wellington MP Grant Robertson promptly declared his candidacy, claiming he would be a "unifying" figure supported by most of the caucus.

Andrew Little, a former party president and previously head of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), also said he had been "prevailed upon by a large number of people" from both union and business circles to consider standing. The EPMU, Labour's largest affiliate, earlier warned Cunliffe that it might not support him in the coming race, after endorsing him 12 months earlier.

Cunliffe is counting on the backing of the party members and unions whose votes secured his victory as leader last year. He was then touted as the "left wing" candidate following a speech in which he ostensibly distanced himself from Labour's "pro-market" restructuring of the 1984–90 period. The posturing, however, was entirely phony. Labour's election campaign was based on assuring big business that it could be trusted to deepen National's austerity measures by returning budget surpluses at the expense of working people.

Cunliffe's candidacy is now depicted in the media as a largely futile last throw of the dice. At a hostile seven-hour caucus meeting after the election, the MPs installed a known opponent as whip, then openly defied his attempted gagging orders. His former deputy and now the acting leader, David Parker, declared: "I don't think it is tenable for him to continue as leader."

Cunliffe continues to cast himself as the most in touch with the party's members, dismissing Robertson as a product of the parliamentary "beltway." Robertson, 43, became an MP in 2008 following a political apprenticeship as a university student union president, then as a Ministry of Foreign Affairs official before serving as private secretary to former Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark. Robertson, who was deputy leader under Cunliffe's predecessor, David Shearer, was a defeated leadership contender in 2013.

Regarded as the caucus favourite, Robertson has held a number of positions, including spokesperson on state services, tertiary education, health and economic development. Most recently, he led a campaign against Justice Minister Judith Collins, who was accused of a conflict of interest over Chinese dairy products company Oravida, with which her husband has business connections. Playing to Labour's xenophobic anti-China stance against foreign investment, Robertson repeatedly called for her to resign, which she was eventually forced to do.

Commentators from the trade union-funded the *Daily Blog* have mourned Cunliffe's demise as a defeat for the Labour "left." Chris Trotter declared that Cunliffe "was the only choice available to those who wanted to rid the Labour Party of its neoliberal cuckoos" but he had simply proved "unequal to the task." Trotter predicted that Labour will now "capitulate to its parliamentary wing" with "no way back for Cunliffe

and the Left.”

There are no principled differences, however, between the “factions,” all of which are committed to the big business agenda of pro-market restructuring and austerity. They are essentially at war over their rapidly shrinking access to influence, position and careers. Labour, along with the ruling elite as a whole, has moved far to the right over the past three decades, a process that has accelerated since the 2008 financial crisis.

Accordingly, working people have largely deserted Labour, particularly in the main cities of Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, which were traditionally presented as its “strongholds.” In 2008, Labour received 229,786 votes across 22 Auckland electorates, but in 2011 this dropped to just 200,000 and fell again this year to 165,396. In the Wellington electorate of Hutt South, Labour’s vote was down 15 points from 2008. In Christchurch, Labour’s vote dropped by 7,000 despite a severe social crisis due to the slow rebuild after the 2011 earthquake. In the 121-member parliament, Labour this year won just 27 electorate seats and five more from the “list” generated by its share of the overall party vote.

The election outcome reflected, above all, the profound alienation of working people from the entire political establishment. Despite the party resources pumped into several “get out and vote” campaigns, including one by the trade unions, nearly a million eligible people refused to either enrol or cast a ballot.

Labour’s crisis is the outcome of a protracted decline. Like its social democratic counterparts around the world, Labour based itself on the myth that it was possible under capitalism to improve the social position of the working class within a nationally regulated economy. However, the globalisation of production since the late 1970s has completely undermined the agenda of national reformism and parties.

In New Zealand, the ruling elites relied on the Labour government of Prime Minister David Lange to carry out the so-called neo-liberal agenda of dismantling national economic regulation imposed by Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the US. Labour slashed public spending, sold off public enterprises and launched an all-out class war on jobs and living standards. Wages were sharply cut and a period of relentlessly rising inequality opened up.

The working class was deeply shocked and embittered by Labour’s pro-market blitz. Calls for resistance through industrial action were sharply suppressed by the union bureaucracy. The Labour Party split, with a breakaway establishing NewLabour and later the Alliance. However, these formations, along with the Greens, proved to be nothing more than props for subsequent pro-business governments, further alienating the wider population.

The 1999–2008 Helen Clark-led Labour government only deepened and extended the anti-working class offensive. It re-established military ties with Washington after a temporary breakdown caused by the Lange government’s anti-nuclear policy. The renewed defence relationship was consummated with the commitment of NZ troops to the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, as a quid-pro-quo for support for New Zealand’s own neo-colonial operations in the Pacific.

For decades, Labour has operated as an open advocate of the free market, “international competitiveness” and the destruction of past social reforms. It is, as many working people recognise, another party of big business, dedicated to the imposition of austerity at home and war abroad.



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