

International Socialist Organisation seeks to revive New Zealand Labour Party

Tom Peters
27 October 2014

New Zealand's September 20 election resulted in the opposition Labour Party's worst defeat in 92 years. The party received less than 25 percent of the vote. The result reflected widespread alienation from the entire political establishment. Nearly a million people did not vote—about the same number that voted for the conservative National Party government.

Labour, which ditched any policies of social reform decades ago, is widely and correctly viewed as just as much a party of big business as National. It campaigned on a program of deepening National's austerity measures, while fully supporting the military and intelligence alliance with the United States.

For revolutionary socialists, the destruction of illusions in Labour is an essential part of the fight to win workers to an internationalist, socialist program, independent of all the bourgeois parties.

The election exposed the gulf between genuine socialism and the various middle class pseudo-left tendencies, which fundamentally support Labour and the capitalist system. The main pseudo-left outfits—the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), Fightback and Socialist Aotearoa—are part of the Maori nationalist Mana Party, which campaigned in an alliance with the Internet Party to enter parliament with a view to being part of a Labour-led government.

A statement by the ISO National Committee on September 22 mourned Labour's electoral defeat as "bad news for us all." The ISO asserted that Labour was "no political vehicle for the working class" but immediately added that "what happens inside Labour matters." It painted Labour as a "left-wing" alternative to National.

The statement claimed that Labour leader David Cunliffe—who has since resigned—had made a "half-turn towards the left." Another article on September 25,

entitled "The fight is on—in Labour and out," called on Labour and trade union members, students and workers to defend "Labour's left-wing policies" from Cunliffe's opponents within the party.

Cunliffe was installed as Labour leader in September 2013 in a desperate bid to reverse a third disastrous electoral defeat. In his efforts to revive Labour's fortunes, Cunliffe attempted to distance himself from the party's record of "neo-liberalism," with the assistance of the ISO, which treated his posturing as good coin.

In fact, the 1984-1990 Labour government began the onslaught on the social position of the working class with a series of pro-market "reforms," privatisations, mass redundancies and slashing taxes for the rich. So far-reaching were its pro-business measures that New Zealand was hailed as an international model for economic restructuring.

Successive Labour and National-led governments deepened these attacks. Cunliffe himself has a long pro-business record. In 2011, as Labour's finance spokesman, he declared that "under any government there would have to be [budget] cuts" because of the recession.

As well as endorsing Cunliffe, the ISO praised Labour's regressive campaign policies. Labour's election platform outlined plans for cost cutting, stepping up the exploitation of working people, raising the retirement age from 65 to 67, and taking part in future imperialist wars—in line with the previous Labour government's troop deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq (see: New Zealand pseudo-lefts promote new Labour leader).

During the election campaign, Cunliffe joined Prime Minister John Key in declaring support for Washington's renewed military intervention in Iraq.

The pseudo-lefts, along with Internet-Mana, remained silent on the issue, indicating their own support for the war.

The ISO National Committee blamed Labour's defeat not on its pro-business agenda, but on the working class, which it implied was either right wing or apathetic. It declared that the National government, "by and large, has succeeded" in portraying Prime Minister Key as "competent, likeable and popular." In reality, the mass abstention in the election demonstrates that there is widespread hostility toward every established party.

The ISO also declared that National had "avoid[ed] full-frontal confrontations with the organised working class," by which the ISO means the trade union apparatus, not workers as such. In fact, the National government relied heavily on the trade unions to suppress the opposition of the working class to its offensive on jobs, wages and public services.

Under National, more than 7,000 public sector workers were made redundant in the past six years, as well as thousands of workers at the state-owned NZ Post, Solid Energy and KiwiRail. Key's government also increased the sales tax and slashing funding for essential services. In every case, it was the trade unions that avoided "confrontations" and collaborated in imposing the austerity measures.

According to the ISO, National was also re-elected because the party "position[ed] themselves 'left'... promoting a socially liberal, 'diverse' image of themselves" by supporting same-sex marriage and promoting more Maori MPs."

This comment is revealing. What the ISO and other pseudo-left groups regard as "left wing" is the politics of identity, based on race, gender and sexual orientation, which reflects the desires of layers of the upper middle class for individual advancement within the political and business establishment. It is the interests of this comfortable layer—including union bureaucrats, academics, capitalist party hacks and entrepreneurs—that the ISO represents.

The legalisation of same-sex marriage last year, while in itself a progressive step, was cynically used by the Key government and the opposition parties to give themselves "socially liberal" credentials while they all supported attacks on the social position of the working class.

The ISO is bitter that National co-opted these policies to give itself a "left" facade—a strategy that the pseudo-lefts support when it is employed by Labour, the Mana Party and the Greens. Last year, the ISO ludicrously pointed to a push by Labour members to increase the number of women in the parliamentary party as evidence that they were "left wing."

Mana, in which the ISO is active, has an explicitly race-based policy platform, which calls for greater government funding for Maori tribal businesses. It also supports the privatisation of welfare services, as part of the government's Whanau Ora scheme, to benefit tribes.

These Maori nationalist policies are profoundly reactionary. During the election campaign, Mana joined Labour and the right-wing NZ First Party in campaigning against immigration and foreign investment, particularly from China. The anti-Chinese campaign dovetailed with the push by the Obama administration to strengthen its alliance with NZ as part of Washington's "pivot" to Asia—the military encirclement and preparations for war with China.

The ISO's promotion of Labour, a warmongering party of big business, as "left wing" is an expression of the deeply reactionary politics of the pseudo-left groups, which seek to shackle the working class to the capitalist political establishment. The only way workers and young people can fight the agenda of war and austerity supported by all the parliamentary parties is to build their own party, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program, as part of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact