

# New Zealand Labour Party stages election leadership charade

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In the wake of the September 20 general election, four contenders have emerged for the leadership of New Zealand's opposition Labour Party. The National Party government was returned with an increased majority as the Labour vote slumped to below 25 percent, its worst result since 1922 and third successive defeat.

David Cunliffe, who was installed as Labour leader in September 2013 in a desperate bid to revive the party's standing, resigned on September 27 amid growing recriminations and a deeply hostile caucus. He initially declared he would re-contest the leadership but withdrew after single-term MP Andrew Little, former national secretary of the Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), declared his candidacy.

Little, who is also a former Labour Party president, is expected to win the support of a majority of the affiliated unions that backed Cunliffe in the 2013 leadership contest. The Dairy Workers' Union has joined with the EPMU to endorse Little, guaranteeing him almost half the total union votes.

The remaining three candidates are: Wellington MP Grant Robertson, finance spokesman and acting leader David Parker and leader of the unofficial Maori caucus, Nanaia Mahuta, who represents the Maori electorate of Hauraki-Waikato.

The contest, which runs until November 18, is conducted under rules adopted at an acrimonious party conference in 2012, purportedly to "democratise" the selection process by taking the decision out of the hands of the parliamentary caucus. The votes are divided three ways: 40 percent each to the MPs and wider membership, and 20 percent to the affiliated unions.

The new process has done nothing to re-establish any connection between Labour and the working class.

Cunliffe was elected leader with strong support from the membership and union affiliates, and falsely promoted by liberal commentators and the pseudo-left groups as "left wing." He campaigned in the election, however, by promising greater austerity, including lifting the pension age, and whipping up anti-immigrant sentiment.

Labour has long ceased to offer even minimal social reforms. In the 1980s, the Labour government was hailed internationally as a model for the imposition of pro-market restructuring that reversed many of the previous gains of the working class, and set the pattern for subsequent National and Labour governments.

As a result Labour is viewed by workers as a big business party like National. Its union base has become a compliant, de facto arm of corporate management. Workers have largely deserted the official Labour movement, which has no mass membership base and, despite National's six years of vicious austerity measures, rapidly declining electoral support.

Labour's pro-war character was highlighted in a leadership debate on TV 1's "Q and A" program on October 19. Asked where they stood on a looming decision by the government to join US-led military operations in the Middle East, each candidate lined up to declare that so long as any such action was covered by a UN mandate, and preferably couched as a "humanitarian" mission to combat Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Labour should endorse it.

All four agree with the party's austerity agenda. Parker and Mahuta were cabinet ministers in the Helen Clark-led 1999-2008 Labour government, which deepened the attacks on workers' jobs and living standards during a booming share market. Parker continues to defend the right-wing economic program he was responsible for putting before voters at the

election, saying it was not “sold” properly to the electorate.

After a political apprenticeship as a student union leader, Robertson was Clark’s private secretary before becoming an MP in 2008. He was deputy leader under Cunliffe’s predecessor, David Shearer. He was the first to declare his candidacy, and appears to have considerable support within the caucus. He and his running mate for the deputy leadership, Jacida Adern, are vacuously posturing as the “new generation.”

Mahuta declared she is standing to show that Maori people—who are vastly over-represented in every statistic on poverty and social devastation—have a “place” within Labour. Mahuta however, represents a privileged middle class layer that has benefited from the multi-million dollar Treaty of Waitangi settlement process. She has close links with the leadership of the powerful Tainui tribe, which controls business interests valued at over \$NZ1 billion.

Little, who has considerable support in business circles and the media, is being touted as the possible front-runner. Little proved his worth to the corporate establishment through his leadership of the EPMU from 2000 to 2011. He has been endorsed by the union-sponsored Daily Blog as a “unifying” figure and also by prominent right-wing broadcaster Mike Hosking. Hosking praised Little’s stated readiness to dump policies that “won’t work,” including a proposed capital gains tax and limited measures to rein in rampant power prices.

Under Little and his predecessor Rex Jones, another Labour Party president (1986-7), the EPMU presided over the decimation of jobs and working conditions in manufacturing. Automobile assembly, rail manufacturing and repair, aeroplane servicing, clothing and, most recently, the postal service, have been all but wiped out. The EPMU, which in the 1980s was the first union to advocate a policy of overt collaboration with employers through such mechanisms as “quality circles,” has for decades been the chief enforcer of the pro-business assault. It maintained its membership base, not by defending jobs and conditions, but by absorbing smaller unions.

The consequences of the EPMU’s class collaboration were exposed in 2010 when 29 miners were killed in a methane explosion at the Pike River (PRC) mine. The EPMU, which represented half the

workforce, rushed to exonerate the company. Little told the *New Zealand Herald* that PRC had an “active health and safety committee” and there was “nothing unusual about Pike River ... that we’ve been particularly concerned about.”

The EPMU had worked hand-in-glove with PRC to suppress workers’ opposition to the lack of safety standards, even after a group of workers walked off the job and called a union official to protest the lack of basic safety equipment. Nobody has been held legally accountable for the disaster, and Little has refused to accept any responsibility for the union’s role in preparing the conditions that led to the deaths.

All the leadership contestants have opened their campaigns with worthless noises about “reconnecting” Labour with working people, while advocating that Labour cements its base outside the working class. Mahuta told a Wellington meeting that Labour’s policies were not resonating with the “ladder of aspiration,” with small business owners and people who wanted to “get ahead.” Parker declared that Labour had become a “cult” and needed to ditch its traditional attachment to the colour red in order to orient to contractors and the self-employed, and “foster innovation.” Robertson maintains that Labour needs to reward “aspiration.”

None of the four has said anything to differentiate Labour in any way from National, which has begun its new term in office with an offensive on employment conditions and the sale of public housing. On all the essentials they agree with the government’s agenda of austerity at home and militarism abroad.



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