

New Zealand Labour elects new right-wing leader

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New Zealand's opposition Labour Party announced on November 18 that it elected Andrew Little as leader, by a margin of just one percent over rival Grant Robertson. The leadership change follows a weeks-long, primary-style campaign involving four candidates, all of them supporters of big business and militarism.

Little, the former leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), won with support from only four caucus members, but with three quarters of the votes from Labour's affiliated trade union bureaucracy. He was widely endorsed by corporate media commentators, including the *New Zealand Herald*'s John Armstrong and the *National Business Review*'s Rob Hosking.

The ruling elite appreciates the services provided by Little and the EPMU, one of the country's largest unions, in helping to prevent any struggles by workers to defend their living conditions. Since the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008 alone, the union has collaborated in imposing thousands of redundancies, including at dozens of manufacturing companies, state-owned NZ Post and Solid Energy's coal mines.

Little demonstrated his personal usefulness following the Pike River Coal mine disaster in 2010, which killed 29 miners. He rushed to defend the company, telling the *Herald* the mine had an "active health and safety committee" and there was "nothing unusual about Pike River ... that we've been particularly concerned about." The EPMU prevented industrial action at the mine before the disaster and said nothing about its appalling lack of safety. None of the media commentary during or since Labour's leadership contest has mentioned this sordid record.

One of Little's first actions as leader was to support the government's so-called Countering Terrorist

Fighters Bill. This anti-democratic legislation will increase funding for the Security Intelligence Service (SIS) and allow it to carry out warrantless spying on New Zealanders. It will also permit the government to cancel passports, even when citizens are overseas, effectively leaving them stateless.

Former Labour leader David Cunliffe stepped down after the party suffered its worst defeat in 92 years at the September 20 election, receiving just 25 percent of the vote. As in the 2011 election, about one million people did not vote (out of 3.4 million eligible people), a near-record low turnout that reflects the hostility of the working class toward the entire political establishment. The only immediate beneficiary, however, was Prime Minister John Key's openly right-wing National Party-led government.

Cunliffe was installed in September 2013 in a desperate attempt to stave off a third consecutive election defeat. Liberal and pseudo-left commentators sought to promote the illusion that Cunliffe would take steps, in the words of the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), to "push Labour, to some extent, to the Left."

Labour's election campaign exposed these claims as a fraud. Cunliffe declared his support for the US bombing of Iraq and repeatedly praised the Key government's response to the economic crisis over the past six years. Labour accepted National's main austerity policies—including an increase in the regressive Goods and Services Tax (GST), thousands of public sector job cuts and part-privatisation of power companies. Labour attacked the government from the right for refusing to raise the retirement age.

Labour and the Greens forged an electoral bloc with the right-wing populist NZ First Party. Labour joined NZ First and the Maori nationalist Mana Party in a

reactionary campaign against Chinese investment and immigration. This dovetailed with the needs of US imperialism, which, as part of its “pivot to Asia,” is seeking to undermine China throughout the region and prepare for war.

After Cunliffe’s spectacular failure to boost Labour’s support in the working class, the party’s supporters in the media and the petty bourgeois “left” are now claiming that Little can revive the party. Columnist Chris Trotter, writing on the trade union-funded *Daily Blog*, declared Little’s installment “a win for those Labour members who still believe in the party’s emancipatory vision and in its antagonistic stance towards the demands of Capital.”

Such claims have absolutely no basis in reality. Labour abandoned any reformist policies during the 1980s, when Labour Prime Minister David Lange and Finance Minister Roger Douglas led a pro-market onslaught against the working class. Labour slashed corporate and top income tax rates, introduced the GST and began the privatisation of state-owned companies.

The 1990s National Party government continued the right-wing restructuring, including by sharply reducing welfare benefits. The 1999–2008 Labour government did not reverse any of these policies and presided over deepening levels of social inequality.

Other commentators criticised Little, without calling for workers to break from the Labour Party. *Daily Blog* editor Martyn Bradbury, who supported Cunliffe, described the EPMU and Little as “very conservative.” Nevertheless, he declared that “Little can beat Key” in 2017 and Labour would be a “slightly less awful” government than National.

In a series of blog posts, Bradbury viciously lashed out at the working class for failing to vote for Labour, slandering the population as “anti-intellectual,” supporters of “Maori bashing,” war, mass surveillance and “dirty politics.” In fact, the near-record voter abstention demonstrates that most workers correctly see Labour as no alternative to National. Labour fully supports the alliance with US imperialism, having sent troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, and has no real objection to the anti-democratic activities of the spy agencies.

John Minto, a leading member of the Maori nationalist Mana Party, also made token criticisms of Little, writing that he was “deeply conservative

economically” and would “continue following neo-liberal tradition.” Mana—which includes the pseudo-left ISO, Fightback and Socialist Aotearoa—and its electoral ally the Internet Party campaigned in the September 20 national election on the slogan “change the government.” Mana, which lost its only seat in parliament, had hoped to join a Labour-led coalition and has no intention of abandoning this goal.

An October 22 editorial in the party publication *Mana News* advised the next Labour leader to “build an alliance” for the 2017 election by holding talks with not only Mana and the Greens, but also the right-wing NZ First and the Maori Party, which is a coalition partner in the National government. Like the Maori Party, Mana has a thoroughly pro-business orientation; it supports the privatisation of welfare services to benefit Maori tribes, under the Whanau Ora scheme, and calls for bigger government handouts to tribal businesses.



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