

New Zealand First Party attacks foreign students

Tom Peters**9 February 2015**

Winston Peters, leader of the right-wing populist New Zealand First Party, issued a statement on January 27 denouncing the National Party government for “softening restrictions” on work visas for foreign students and allowing students to immigrate “through the back door.”

Peters singled out Indian students, declaring that their numbers had “risen 60 percent” in the past year. He ranted that “We can look around and see that overseas students are behind the counters in our supermarkets and working in service stations,” creating “unfair competition” for “Kiwi workers.” He asked, “Why should foreign students be allowed to work at all?”

This provocative and racist statement was aimed at exploiting anger over the government’s cuts to education funding, constant increases in university fees, the sky-rocketing cost of accommodation and the lack of decent jobs, and diverting it into the most reactionary channels.

Students and young people are among the hardest hit by the social crisis that has unfolded since the 2008 financial crash. A survey of 5,000 full-time students published last September by the New Zealand Union of Students’ Associations (NZUSA) found that nearly half were in “financial distress,” struggling to pay for food, rent and clothing. Foreign students are forced to pay high, unsubsidised fees and often work long hours for little pay. In 2013 a Department of Labour survey found that “nearly one in ten” international students who worked were paid below the minimum wage.

NZ First is a vicious anti-Asian party, founded in 1993 on a platform of opposition to immigration. It has blamed Chinese and Indian immigrants, in particular, for the housing shortage, unemployment, organised crime, and putting pressure on pensions.

Peters’ latest outburst illustrates the sharp shift to the

right in official politics. None of the other opposition parties—Labour, the Greens, and the Maori nationalist Mana Party—criticised Peters’ attack on foreign students. The NZUSA also remained silent.

Two trade union leaders made statements echoing NZ First. On January 28, Jill Ovens, northern regional secretary for the Service and Food Workers Union, told Radio NZ that “international students from India” were being hired as “cheap labour” to “undermine” cleaning workers’ pay and conditions. Ovens claimed she was “not blaming the students” but their employers, but she made no criticism of NZ First.

On January 26 Tertiary Education Union president Sandra Grey expressed “concern” that there was “an immense push by the Government for institutions to make up shortfalls in their budgets, using international students. The policy directive is, ‘Bring them in, bring them in, bring them in’.” She told the *Nelson Mail* the increased numbers were causing “a very big strain right across the country,” driving up rents and intensifying competition for jobs.

While Grey and Ovens both professed sympathy for international students, their basic message was the same as NZ First’s: that immigrants are putting pressure on New Zealanders’ living conditions.

The union bureaucracy’s embrace of NZ First was also expressed at the Unite union’s conference last November. Peters was invited to speak at the conference, where he blamed insecure working conditions and low pay on “record levels of immigration.”

The Daily Blog, which is funded by Unite and four other trade unions, has given a regular column to NZ First member Curwen Ares Rolinson, who uses it to promote nationalism and militarism. On February 2 the blog’s editor Martyn Bradbury announced his support

for NZ First's candidate in an upcoming by-election in the seat of Northland, prompted by the resignation of National Party MP Mike Sabin.

The middle class pseudo-left groups Fightback, the International Socialist Organisation and Socialist Aotearoa—which all work within Unite and the Mana Party—are complicit in the promotion of NZ First. None of them criticised Peters' attack on Indian students or Unite's decision to invite him to its conference. These outfits campaigned on behalf of Mana in last year's election, falsely depicting it as a "pro-poor" party, even as Mana advocated discrimination against immigrant workers and signalled its willingness to work with NZ First in government.

The Labour Party, Mana, the Greens and trade union bureaucracy are all adopting NZ First's positions. They are seeking to whip up hostility to Asian immigrants in order to divide the working class and divert attention from the failure of capitalism to provide jobs and basic services, including free education for all.

The opposition parties fundamentally agree with the government that the working class must pay for the economic crisis through a reduction in its standard of living. The unions have worked for decades hand-in-glove with the government and corporations to suppress opposition to factory closures and redundancies, including the downsizing of university departments. The student and staff unions have not launched any campaign against the government's fee increases or the moves to introduce more stringent enrolment criteria.

Labour contested the September 2014 election promising to form a three-way coalition government with the Greens and NZ First, supported by Mana. The four parties ran a thoroughly xenophobic campaign, attacking the government for allowing Chinese investment in farmland. Mana, Labour and NZ First also called for a ban on house sales to foreigners and blamed Asian migrant workers for low wages and unemployment.

The anti-Chinese campaign, which began in 2012 over the sale of the Crafar family's farms to a Chinese company, dovetails with Washington's push to incorporate New Zealand into its military encirclement and preparations for war against China. While the National government supports US imperialism and has promised to send troops to Iraq, Labour has pressured the government to cut business ties with China and

align more openly with the Obama administration's "pivot" against Beijing.

Students and workers must oppose the xenophobic campaign against international students and immigrants. Workers and young people must have the right to live, work and study in any part of the world, with full citizenship rights. This requires a struggle against all the established political parties and their trade union and pseudo-left allies, which all support the capitalist system and its irrational division of the world into competing nation states.

We call on young people and students to join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and fight to build it in New Zealand. The IYSSE is the youth organisation of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the only worldwide political party that fights to unite the international working class in a struggle against war and austerity on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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