

Opposition parties promote anti-immigrant New Zealand First

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26 March 2015

A by-election this Saturday in New Zealand's Northland electorate has again revealed the profound shift to the right by the entire political establishment. In the seat that has been held by the conservative National Party for 67 of the last 70 years, Winston Peters, leader of the populist anti-immigrant New Zealand First Party, has emerged as a major contender. That is largely thanks to support from the opposition Labour Party, the Greens, the Maori nationalist Mana Party and numerous "left" media commentators.

The by-election follows the resignation of National MP Mike Sabin in January amid rumours about a police investigation into an assault. National currently holds 60 of the 121 seats in parliament and relies on small right-wing parties, ACT, United Future and the Maori Party, to govern.

The government is deepening its assault on workers' living standards, with plans to sell off a large tranche of public housing, open more charter schools and impose further cuts to spending on welfare, health care and education, in order to return a budget surplus. National has committed troops to Iraq and expanded the powers of the state's spy agencies. It is pursuing the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, which is part of Washington's "pivot to Asia," designed to isolate China.

Northland is one of the most deprived parts of the country. Economist Shamubeel Eaquab has likened social conditions to East Timor, one of the world's poorest countries. Among general electorates, Northland had in 2013 the second-lowest median family income (\$51,400), and the lowest proportion of wage and salary workers (31.5 percent).

Northland is also extremely unequal, with enclaves of considerable wealth in the Bay of Islands. National has maintained its grip on the electorate because most

working people are either enrolled on the separate Maori electoral roll for the Te Tai Tokerau seat, or are totally alienated and have stopped voting.

NZ First is the fourth largest party in parliament with 11 MPs and 9 percent of the vote in the September 2014 election. It is seeking to divert, in a reactionary direction, the widespread hostility to the government and Labour, which shares National's austerity agenda. If Peters, who currently holds a NZ First list parliamentary seat, wins Northland it will allow his party to install another member of parliament.

Peters founded NZ First on an openly xenophobic and anti-immigrant platform in 1993, following his resignation from the then-National government. The party formed coalition governments in 1996 with National, and in 2005 with Labour, which appointed Peters as foreign minister.

Since 2012, NZ First, along with the Greens, the Maori nationalist Mana Party and Labour, has joined in nationalist protests against Chinese investment. Peters and his colleagues have repeatedly made racist attacks on Chinese and Indian immigrants, including foreign students, blaming them for the housing shortage, unemployment, gambling, prostitution, organised crime, and for putting pressure on pensions and the education system. The party has also targeted Muslims, slandering them as potential terrorists.

This chauvinist campaign dovetails with US moves to incorporate New Zealand more fully into its anti-China operations, particularly in intelligence and military cooperation. National has attempted to balance New Zealand's trading relationship with China against longstanding defence and financial ties with the US. Peters is being promoted by sections of the ruling elite, represented by Labour, who favour a more overtly pro-Washington stance against Beijing.

Prime Minister John Key initially dismissed Peters' bid for the Northland seat, saying he had "no chance," but has cut short a state visit to Japan for the last week of the campaign. In a sign of alarm, the government has suddenly found tens of millions of dollars to upgrade roads and bridges in the long-neglected region.

Far from opposing the government, however, Peters told TV3's "The Nation" last week that he could support National's proposed changes to the Resource Management Act. The changes are designed to boost corporate profits, particularly in the building and construction sector, by cutting environmental protections and making it easier for speculators to undertake property developments.

Following a poll on March 5 showing 35 percent support for Peters, against 30 percent for National's candidate Mark Osborne, the entire opposition bloc endorsed Peters as a "lesser evil." Labour, the Greens and the Mana Party—and the opposition's backers in the trade unions and the media—are drumming up support for the racist party, despite Labour and Mana fielding their own candidates.

Labour Party leader Andrew Little effectively instructed Northlanders to vote for Peters, telling TVNZ that while Labour would not pull out its candidate, Willow-Jean Prime, voters should be "realistic" if they wanted "to send a message to the government."

The Green Party is not standing a candidate and also supports Peters. Speaking to Radio Waatea on March 11, Greens co-leader Metiria Turei enthused that "Winston" had really "freaked National out." While stating that "Winston and the Greens don't always agree on everything," she made no criticism of NZ First's xenophobia and stressed that "we don't have a bad relationship ... our MPs get along really well ... and I have a lot of time for Winston, I really do."

During the 2014 election campaign the Greens emphasised their willingness to govern in a coalition with NZ First and Labour.

In February, when Peters was still considering whether to contest the by-election, Mana Party leader Hone Harawira all but endorsed him. "He is a home boy, he could take it ... He is a Northland boy," Harawira told Fairfax Media.

Mana is a profoundly nationalistic party, representing Maori capitalists. Like NZ First, it has campaigned for

foreigners to be restricted from buying houses and for the government and Maori-owned businesses to "prioritise the employment of New Zealand residents" over immigrants.

The pseudo-left groups, Fightback, the International Socialist Organisation and Socialist Aotearoa—which work within the Unite Union and Mana—are complicit in the promotion of NZ First. Peters was invited to speak at Unite's annual conference last November, where he blamed insecure working conditions and low pay on "record levels of immigration." The pseudo-lefts have not criticised Mana or Unite for embracing Peters.



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