

New Zealand: International Socialist Organisation leaves Mana Party

Tom Peters
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The International Socialist Organisation (ISO) posted a statement on its New Zealand web site on March 3 about its decision to exit the Maori nationalist Mana Party, after four years working within it and campaigning for it in the 2011 and 2014 elections.

The statement made clear that the pseudo-left group has no principled differences with Mana, a capitalist party that represents sections of the Maori elite and middle class. The ISO declared that it would be “proud to work alongside” Mana’s leading members Hone Harawira, John Minto and Annette Sykes in the future.

The decision to leave was based purely on the failure of Mana and its ally, the Internet Party (IP), to gain any significant support in last September’s election. Mana’s leader and sole MP Hone Harawira lost his seat in parliament, despite a highly visible campaign funded by IP founder and multi-millionaire Kim Dotcom.

The election returned the conservative National Party government to office but was marked by near-record abstention of almost one million people, reflecting widespread hostility to all existing parliamentary parties. The Labour Party suffered its lowest vote in 92 years. It supports the government’s austerity agenda and its collaboration with US imperialism in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Internet-Mana, a coalition of two pro-business parties that aimed to participate in a Labour-led government, was incapable of presenting itself as an alternative to the political establishment. It got just 1.4 percent of the vote.

Mana was formed in 2011 as a split from the right-wing Maori Party, which works closely with the government. Harawira left the Maori Party only after it discredited itself by collaborating with National for two years and supporting its austerity measures, including an increase in the Goods and Services Tax and cuts to

welfare and other social services.

Various petty bourgeois politicians flocked to Mana, including ex-Green Party MP Sue Bradford and Unite union bureaucrats Matt McCarten and Gerard Hehir—both former members of the self-styled “left” Alliance Party. The ISO was one of three pseudo-left organisations that joined Mana (the others, Fightback and Socialist Aotearoa, remain in the party), and promoted it as “pro-worker,” “anti-neoliberal” and “anti-rich.”

Justifying its decision to join Mana, the ISO statement declared: “In Greece, an anti-capitalist alliance, Syriza, went from insignificance on the margins to hold the balance of power as the largest single party in a country of 11 million. We hoped that in Aotearoa [New Zealand] too we would see a resurgence of the left and greeted Hone Harawira’s break from the Maori Party with enthusiasm.”

These words reveal the class character of both the ISO and Mana. Far from being “anti-capitalist,” Syriza has exposed itself as the servant of the Greek and European bourgeoisie. Since forming government, Syriza has promised to impose the austerity measures demanded by the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The ISO-affiliated group within Syriza, the Workers Internationalist Left, is defending this betrayal of the Greek working class, which voted for Syriza based on its election pledges to overturn the austerity measures. (See: “ISO-allied pseudo-lefts within Syriza defend their capitulation to austerity”)

Around the world, groups such as the ISO aspire to form Syriza-style parties that will above all block the emergence of a genuine socialist movement based on the working class. The pseudo-lefts aim to gain a foothold in parliament, and in a capitalist government,

to advance the interests of the privileged middle class layer that they represent.

Mana was intended to serve this purpose in New Zealand, taking advantage of widespread hostility toward National and Labour, while steering opposition away from any political struggle against capitalism.

Alongside minor reforms, including meals in schools and a higher minimum wage, Mana's main demand is for the government to "invest in and better support Maori business enterprise." It calls for "increas[ing] the value of settlements" paid by the government to tribal-run businesses under the Treaty of Waitangi process.

Like the Maori Party, Mana supports the government's Whanau Ora scheme, which privatised the delivery of some welfare services, in order to benefit Maori trusts.

Since 2012, Mana has participated alongside Labour and the right-wing, anti-immigrant NZ First Party in a racist campaign against Chinese investment. Like NZ First, Mana has advocated restrictions on foreigners buying houses and on immigration, which is largely from Asia. Mana supported NZ First leader Winston Peters' campaign in the March 28 by-election in the Northland electorate.

The pseudo-lefts all seek to cover up Mana's reactionary program. They present Mana's promotion of racial identity politics as "progressive," when in reality it serves to divide the working class and shackle oppressed Maori workers to the tribal and Maori nationalist leadership.

The ISO statement criticised Mana's "disastrous alliance" with the Internet Party in 2014, complaining that it "compromised the legacy of the party" and damaged its "pro-poor" branding, in a failed attempt to increase its presence in parliament.

However the ISO, Fightback and Socialist Aotearoa entirely supported the merger with the IP—a party that called for state loans and other incentives for web-based companies like those owned by its founder Dotcom. Merger talks were unanimously endorsed at Mana's conference in April 2014, which was attended by representatives of the pseudo-left groups. The ISO campaigned for Internet-Mana in the September election. If the alliance had entered parliament, the ISO would have stayed within it.

Like Socialist Aotearoa, the ISO blamed Mana's defeat mainly on the working class, saying it was "not

militant or desperate enough to catapult a radical parliamentary alternative to power."

Apart from underscoring the ISO's parliamentary aspirations, this accusation is full of contempt for the working class, which has suffered a major decline in its living standards as a result of thousands of state and private sector job cuts, soaring housing costs, and severe cuts to welfare, health care and education. There is also widespread opposition to the government's indiscriminate spying on millions of people and its support for US wars.

Mana does not represent an alternative to any of this and has largely discredited itself among working people. For the ISO, this is merely a problem of branding—that is, Mana's phony pro-poor posturing. It is more than ready to rejoin Mana's "activists" in a new organisation. The ISO statement declared: "The political vehicle is not all-important. It is the people that make up the party that are important. There will be other parties and other movements."

Such a regroupment would be pro-capitalist like Mana and its predecessor, the Alliance, which went into coalition with Labour in 1999 and collapsed ignominiously after voting to send troops to the US-led war in Afghanistan. What the ISO has in mind is a party like Syriza, which has gained office amid a severe social crisis and is taking direct responsibility for imposing austerity on the Greek working class.

The real alternative for workers and youth who oppose war and the attacks on democratic rights and living standards is to join the International Committee of the Fourth International and fight to build its section in New Zealand. The ICFI is the only movement based on genuine socialism and internationalism, and which seeks to unite workers around the world in a revolutionary struggle against capitalism, in opposition to all the bourgeois parties and their middle class cheerleaders.



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