

New Zealand political leaders feign sympathy for refugees

The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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New Zealand Prime Minister John Key announced on Monday that his National Party government would accept an extra 600 refugees from Syria over the next three years, in addition to the country's annual United Nations refugee quota of 750 people per year.

The announcement follows an outpouring of public sympathy for the millions of people fleeing Syria, Libya, Iraq, Yemen and other countries that have been devastated by war, generating the most severe refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. Throughout the world, people have been shocked by photos of children who drowned in the Mediterranean and the brutal treatment of refugees by governments in Europe and elsewhere.

Thousands of New Zealanders have signed online petitions and are expected to join protests in coming days, calling for an increase in the government's refugee quota. This quota has not been raised in 28 years and is the 90th lowest in the world on a per capita basis. Hundreds of people have also offered to accommodate refugees in their homes.

The support for refugees in the working class contrasts sharply with the attitude of the ruling elite and the parliamentary parties. While shedding crocodile tears for the victims of the Syrian war, the government and opposition have refused to take any significant steps to assist them.

Labour Party leader Andrew Little and Green Party co-leader James Shaw immediately praised Key's announcement, which amounts to a pledge to accept 0.015 percent of the estimated four million people who have fled Syria. Little told TVNZ on Sunday that accommodating many more refugees would be "very, very difficult" and even "impossible." The government's austerity measures since the 2008 financial crisis, with which Labour agrees, have

included numerous cuts to refugee resettlement services.

The hypocrisy and deceit of all the political leaders is underscored by their support for New Zealand's alliance with Washington and the imperialist wars that have produced the humanitarian catastrophe. Key cynically exploited the refugee crisis to justify sending 143 troops earlier this year to join the Obama administration's renewed war in the Middle East, on the pretext of fighting Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In reality, the war is aimed at bringing the entire oil-rich region under US control and replacing Syria's Assad regime with a US puppet.

Key also defended the bombing of Syria, telling the media: "They're very careful about the way they undertake those air strikes to make sure that there's the minimum amount of civilian casualties." In fact, reports indicate that over 1,000 civilians have been killed in approximately 6,500 air strikes in Iraq and Syria in the past year. The real toll is undoubtedly far higher because the US and its allies cover up and deny revelations of civilians killed in their bombing operations.

While Labour voted against the recent troop deployment, it supports the war. The 1999–2008 Labour government sent troops to join the US occupations of both Iraq and Afghanistan. The Greens backed the deployment to Afghanistan and, along with National and Labour, repeatedly called on the UN Security Council to pass resolutions that would pave the way for direct military intervention in Syria. Pro-Labour commentators Chris Trotter and Josie Pagani recently advocated a major escalation in the US-led war against ISIS and the Assad regime.

The position of the pseudo-left Socialist Aotearoa (SA), which is affiliated to the Maori nationalist Mana

Party, is equally cynical. This group is helping to organise a rally in Auckland next week, calling for 10,000 refugees to be allowed into the country. Yet SA, along with the International Socialist Organisation, Fightback and similar pseudo-left tendencies in Europe and America, supports imperialist intervention in the Middle East. In 2012, SA depicted the militias who have laid waste to Syria in their war against Assad as leaders of a “revolution.” These “rebels” were armed and funded by the US and its regional allies, and are dominated by Sunni extremist groups, including ISIS and the Al-Qaeda affiliated Al Nusra Front.

Labour and the Greens are calling on the government to lift the annual refugee quota by 250 people. This miniscule number is an affront to human decency.

Little declared that “New Zealand has a proud history of opening our doors to refugees,” referring to the country’s very modest intake of refugees after World War II and from Vietnam and Cambodia.

Claims about New Zealand’s “proud humanitarian history,” repeated throughout the media and by politicians of all stripes, have no basis in fact. The treatment of refugees and migrants by the ruling class has always been brutal. As Vladimir Lenin noted more than 100 years ago, national “exclusivism,” which included “savage restrictions” on immigration from China, was a “distinctive feature” of New Zealand imperialism in the South Pacific.

Historian Ann Beaglehole noted in the *Dominion Post* on Tuesday: “During the 1930s, the government turned away most Jewish refugees trying to escape Nazi-dominated Europe. They were told it was not even worth applying... Chinese refugees, fleeing war and upheaval in the 1930s and in the mid twentieth century, were also not wanted.” Only tiny numbers were admitted.

Labour and National-led governments alike are infamous for their harassment and intimidation of immigrants from neighbouring islands. Samoa was a New Zealand colony for five decades until 1962. During the 1970s, police staged dawn raids on the homes of Pacific Islanders living in New Zealand and expelled “overstayers.” The 1982 Citizenship (Western Samoa) Act, made 170,000 Samoans born before 1949 and their children ineligible to be New Zealand citizens.

Founded in 1916, the Labour Party, like its

counterpart in Australia, maintained a racist immigration policy aimed at keeping out non-whites, especially Asians. This was the official policy of successive governments until 1974.

The 1999–2008 Labour government used the fraudulent “war on terror” as a pretext to tighten “border security” and drastically reduce the number of asylum seekers entering the country by plane. The current National government, for its part, has collaborated in Australia’s persecution of refugees, including their imprisonment in offshore camps in Nauru and Papua New Guinea.

As the country’s social crisis has worsened, the entire political establishment and much of the corporate media have blamed foreigners for unemployment, low wages and the soaring cost of living. Since 2012, the Labour Party, the Greens and the Mana Party have allied with the viciously anti-Asian New Zealand First Party, helping it to scapegoat Chinese immigrants for the housing affordability crisis and other worsening social problems produced by the private profit system.

This propaganda is also aimed at facilitating New Zealand’s integration into Obama’s “pivot to Asia”—the military encirclement and preparations for war against China.

Above all, in a country where a quarter of the population was born overseas, xenophobia and chauvinism is being promoted to divide the working class and prevent a unified struggle against capitalism, which is the source of war, the refugee crisis and the deepening attacks on living standards in every country.

Workers and youth must oppose the escalating attacks on refugees and immigrants. Working people must have the right to live, work and study anywhere in the world. This requires a political fight against every existing party, and their pseudo-left hangers-on, based on an international socialist program to abolish the capitalist profit system.



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