

New Zealand's first Labour Party leader was no socialist: A reply to the pseudo-left ISO

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On December 1, 2015, Dougal McNeil, a leading member of the New Zealand branch of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation, gave a 15-minute interview to Radio New Zealand glorifying Harry Holland, who led the Labour Party from its founding in 1916 until his death in 1933.

McNeil, a lecturer in literature at Victoria University of Wellington, described Holland as a “revolutionary” who retained throughout his life “an absolute commitment to a vision of socialism as something anti-capitalist.” He asserted that until some unspecified point during the 1920s, “the [Labour] MPs, the party structure was really subordinate to this goal of an end to capitalist society.” [1]

The ISO is not alone in painting the early Labour Party as socialist. Joe Carolan, leader of the Auckland-based Socialist Aotearoa (SA), declared at the group's 2013 conference: “We are part of [a] heritage on the left in New Zealand ... The early fighters of the Labour Party were socialists.” Such statements are common among pro-Labour columnists, academics and historians.

The pseudo-lefts' claim that Labour was once a socialist party is a blatant falsification of history that reveals their anti-socialist, middle-class politics. Its purpose is to justify support for what is today one of the two main parties of big business and militarism, by encouraging the illusion that the Labour Party, or a section of it, can return to its “socialist” roots.

During the 2014 election both the ISO and SA campaigned on behalf of the Maori nationalist Mana Party and its ally the Internet Party, which hoped to enter parliament in support of Labour. The ISO championed then-Labour leader David Cunliffe as a “left-wing” figure, seeking to cover up his support for austerity and war.

In his radio segment, McNeil made no criticism of the Labour Party's present policies or those of any previous Labour governments. He did not attempt to explain, for instance, why a party supposedly founded on a “socialist” program sent thousands of New Zealand troops to fight and die in World War II after being elected to office in 1935. Instead, he praised Holland's early trade union activities and read out samples of his verse.

Holland arrived in New Zealand from Australia and gained prominence as a trade unionist and journalist during the 1912 Waihi miners' strike and the national strike wave of 1913-1914, during which he was imprisoned for “sedition.” The 1913 strike, which began among waterside workers and was part of an international upsurge of the working class before World War I, was led into a dead-end by the United Federation of Labour (UFL). The union bureaucracy had not wanted the strike and made repeated attempts to shut it down through its negotiations with the government and employers.

The Labour Party was formed in July 1916 by the UFL, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the United Labour Party (ULP). The SDP, in which Holland was a leading figure, had been founded three years earlier as the political arm of the UFL.

The larger Liberal Party had gone into coalition with the right-wing Reform Party government after the outbreak of war, so Labour became the

official parliamentary opposition. Labour's immediate aim was to contain the antiwar movement that had emerged in the working class and ensure that the country continued to supply troops to the imperialist slaughter in the Middle East and Europe.

The Labour Party's founders were steeped in reactionary nationalism, committed to imperialism and the defence of the profit system. They supported the New Zealand bourgeoisie's decision to join World War I, as a junior partner in the British Empire, in order to enrich itself and to seize colonies in the Pacific.

McNeil told Radio NZ that Holland “certainly supported the antiwar effort.” This is completely false. The outbreak of war stripped away the anti-militarist veneer that Holland and a few other “radicals” had cultivated by opposing compulsory military training.

Holland made common cause with the open pro-imperialists in the workers' movement such as Daniel Sullivan, SDP member and president of the UFL in 1914, who took “a prominent part in recruiting drives.” James McCombs, an SDP parliamentarian who became the first Labour Party president, “spoke at almost every possible recruiting meeting week after week.” [2]

Alfred Hindmarsh, a ULP member who led the Labour Party in parliament from 1916 to 1918, “did not oppose the war; indeed, he had been a supporter of compulsory military training and conscription.” [3]

During 1915, amid reports of thousands of New Zealand troops being killed in the Gallipoli campaign, the SDP sought to divert the growing working-class opposition to war into limited protests against conscription, while still supporting the war itself. The Labour Party took the same position.

Holland promoted this line as editor of the *Maoriland Worker*, the weekly newspaper of the UFL and SDP (later the Labour Party). His September 1, 1915, editorial stated: “[I]f every man in New Zealand who declares himself favourable to war is permitted to go to war—and he certainly should be permitted to go—there will be no shortage of men whatever and no need to even talk of Conscription.” [4]

Two weeks later, the newspaper published an open letter to Prime Minister William Massey by national UFL secretary Hiram Hunter. He warned that conscription would “create serious dissention at the time of the greatest crisis in the history of the Empire, just the time when all parties should be at amity with each other.”

The letter, which Holland endorsed in an accompanying editorial, spelled out the patriotic position of the labour aristocracy: “During the currency of the present war those people who have been most strenuously opposed to militarism in every shape and form have preserved a dignified neutrality. They adopted this course because they did not want to cause any embarrassment whilst the war lasted, believing that the Empire was in a supreme struggle to uphold the principles of Democracy.” [5]

The NZ Labour leaders were part of the same privileged layer represented by the parties of the Second International in Europe, which supported their “own” national bourgeoisie in the war. Across the

Tasman, the Australian Labor Party won the 1914 election pledging, in the words of Andrew Fisher who became prime minister, to defend the British Empire to “the last man and the last shilling.”

Fisher visited New Zealand in December 1914 and early 1915 for talks with the government and the SDP. He was warmly received by a committee representing “every industrial and political organisation of Labour in Wellington,” which included Holland. Committee chairman F. McKenzie, “amidst much applause,” read a speech welcoming Fisher which stated: “We are pleased to know that our soldiers will fight side by side with our Australian comrades in defence of our democratic institutions.” [6]

Analysing the Second International’s historic betrayal of socialism in World War I, Lenin determined that a socialist revolution could be led only by a revolutionary party that made a “complete organisational severance” from all class-collaborationist, national opportunist tendencies.

He wrote: “The epoch of imperialism cannot permit the existence, in a single party, of the revolutionary proletariat’s vanguard and the semi-petty-bourgeois aristocracy of the working class, who enjoy morsels of the privileges of their ‘own’ nation’s ‘Great-Power’ status.” [7] The Bolshevik Party, which led the Russian Revolution, was built in the struggle against the traitors of the Second International.

Holland feigned sympathy for the Bolsheviks amid the international wave of support for the Russian Revolution after the war. However, contrary to claims by McNeil and others, he opposed the Bolsheviks’ internationalist perspective of world revolution. In 1920, Holland wrote to the New Zealand Marxian Association that “the Social Revolution [in New Zealand] will achieve itself and be achieved through evolutionary processes”—in other words, through parliamentary reforms under capitalism.

Holland shared the nationalism and xenophobia that is still used by Labour and the trade union bureaucracy to divide the working class. McNeil did not mention that after World War I the Labour Party—like its counterpart in Australia—campaigning for severe restrictions on Asian immigration to avoid “an intermingling of the races detrimental to all” (as a report to Labour’s 1920 conference put it). Labour supported legislation in 1920 designed to exclude Chinese immigrants, known unofficially as a “White New Zealand policy,” which remained in place under successive Labour and conservative governments for more than 50 years.

The Marxian Association—which became the New Zealand Communist Party in 1921—wrote that Holland led a party whose “character is the same as that of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the Labor Parties of England and Australia, the American Federation of Labor and all the opportunist parties and organisations which, throughout the world, have proved themselves a snare and a delusion to the working class.” [8]

In an article published in December in the *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, the ISO’s McNeil rejected this criticism of Holland and Labour. He declared that the study of Holland’s life “helps to undo some of the mental divisions that have calcified and hardened in our own analysis, between Second and Third International thinking, say, between sentiment and ideas, between revolutionary ambition and reformist settlement.” [9]

In other words, through its embrace of Holland, the ISO hopes to rehabilitate the reformists who lined up behind the ruling class in the World War I. Holland’s co-founders of the Labour Party, Michael Joseph Savage and Peter Fraser, led it to electoral victory in 1935. They implemented social reforms in order to prevent a revolutionary upsurge of the working class against capitalism during the Great Depression, then took the country into the second imperialist world war.

There is an objective class logic behind the ISO’s positions and the fact that they are promoted by the state-owned broadcaster and one of the country’s main academic journals. The ISO feels an affinity with the Labour Party founders because it represents the interests of affluent, middle class layers—including union bureaucrats, academics and careerists

in the Labour, Green and Mana parties—who seek to improve their own position within capitalism and are organically hostile to any revolutionary movement of the working class.

McNeil’s silence on the early Labour Party’s anti-Chinese racism is not accidental. Like Labour, the ISO is a profoundly nationalist organisation. From 2011 to 2014, the group was affiliated with the Maori nationalist Mana Party and falsely promoted its race-based identity politics as progressive. In fact the Mana Party represents indigenous capitalists and is particularly hostile to foreigners. Mana has joined Labour and the right-wing NZ First Party in repeatedly attacking Chinese immigrants, scapegoating them for the country’s housing shortage and other social problems.

Internationally, the ISO supports the operations of US imperialism and the financial elite. The organisation painted the US-backed, Al Qaeda-linked “rebels” seeking to bring about regime-change in Syria as leaders of a “revolution.” The ISO backed the Syriza government in Greece—which betrayed its promises to oppose austerity and worked hand-in-glove with the EU and the banks to drive the Greek working class even deeper into poverty.

Amid the greatest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s Great Depression, and the increasingly reckless resort to war by US imperialism and its allies, the betrayals of social democracy 100 years ago have a burning contemporary relevance. New Zealand is going through five years of government-sponsored centenary commemorations of World War I, including the publication of pro-war books and multi-million dollar museum exhibitions. The purpose is to condition the population, especially young people, to support US-led wars in the Middle East, and Washington’s build-up to war against Russia and China.

Under conditions where there is mass opposition to war and hostility toward all the establishment parties, the ISO has stepped forward to drum up support for Labour and its allies and to block the emergence of a genuine antiwar movement. By falsifying history it aims to prevent the working class and youth from drawing the most vital lesson from the carnage of World War I: that another global conflagration can only be prevented by the strategy of world socialist revolution, uniting workers internationally in a fight to put an end to the profit system, which is the source of war.

As Lenin explained, the essential precondition is the building of a revolutionary party to provide workers with the necessary leadership and perspective and to break them from the influence of the political establishment, above all the Labour Party and its pseudo-left apologists.

References:

[1] McNeil’s interview is available here: <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/nights/audio/201781023/1-efthinking>

[2] “The Necessary But Not Sufficient Condition: Christchurch Labour and Working-Class Culture,” Libby Plumridge, *New Zealand Journal of History*, 1985

[3] *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Volume 3, 1996: <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3h28/hindmarsh-alfred-humphrey>

[4] *Maoriland Worker*, September 1, 1915, page 4

[5] *Maoriland Worker*, September 15, 1915, page 4

[6] *Maoriland Worker*, January 13, 1915, page 4

[7] V. I. Lenin, *The Collapse of the Second International*, 1915. Part 9: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/csi/ix.htm>

[8] New Zealand Marxian Association, *Moses Baritz vs. H. E. Holland*, 1920, page 14

[9] “Labouring Feeling: Harry Holland’s Political Emotions,” Dougal McNeil, *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, No 21, 2015



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