

New Zealand Labour Party leader attacks Asian immigrants

John Braddock
28 March 2016

New Zealand's opposition Labour Party has responded to the deteriorating economic situation by stoking reactionary xenophobia and economic nationalism. On March 15, the *Hutt News* reported that during a visit to the working class centre of Lower Hutt, Labour leader Andrew Little blamed semi-skilled migrants from China and India for taking jobs from "those who are already living here."

Little, a former national secretary of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, said immigration was having a downwards impact on the country's wages. "We've got a reasonably high level of inward migration and it's not all at the skilled level. It wasn't the intention of the immigration policy to do that," Little declared.

Little singled out Asian workers, claiming there is an oversupply of Indian and Chinese chefs. "A lot of folks come here from overseas to get into the hospitality industry with those particular cooking skills and I think the question is: can we actually source those labour needs internally?" he asked. Labour would be justified in examining New Zealand's immigration settings, Little asserted, "to make sure we're getting the right mix and balance and that we're not compromising the interests of those who are already living here trying to get decent pay and conditions."

Little is making immigrants the scapegoat for the deepening social crisis for which successive Labour and National governments are responsible. The Labour governments of prime ministers David Lange (1984-1990) and Helen Clark (1999-2008), backed by the trade unions, bear prime responsibility for the extended assault on jobs, pay and living standards. Real hourly wages declined by up to 16 percent over the decade from 1984, and never recovered. Inequality soared. The labour share of income fell from 60 percent

of income in the early 1980s to 46 percent in 2002 before recovering slightly—a loss in current dollar terms of about \$19 billion per year, or \$10,000 per wage earner per year.

Little's call for a cap on immigration coincided with a renewed economic downturn. In January, international credit rating agency Fitch downgraded New Zealand's outlook, saying it expected slower GDP growth due to falling dairy prices. The deepening slump in the industry is causing alarm in wider banking and financial circles, with one economist describing the situation as the worst in real terms since 1912. Thousands of job cuts are also underway, including the closure of Solid Energy coal mines and electronics retailer Dick Smith, and plans for up to 1,000 redundancies at the Inland Revenue Department.

Winston Peters, leader of the right-wing anti-immigrant NZ First Party, seized on Little's comments to launch his own xenophobic anti-Asian diatribe. Peters told the *New Zealand Herald* on March 17 that Labour was "compromised by its past," having previously "supported high levels of immigration" and ignored "the needs of ordinary New Zealand men and women in the workforce."

Peters accused Auckland's ethnic restaurants of being fronts for immigration fraud, charging "phenomenal sums" for job offers to bring people in from overseas. "People pay serious money to come in, all under the table, all wrong, all a total degradation of this country's standards when it comes to workers, and all under our nose," Peters fulminated.

Restaurant owners on Auckland's Dominion Road, who Peters singled out, rejected his charges. Gary Holmes, representing the local Business Association, told the *New Zealand Herald*: "We know many of the business owners personally and they are all genuine,

hard-working people.” Restrictions are already in place. Official immigration figures show visas granted to Chinese chefs are capped at 200 places—under a free trade agreement signed by Labour—and it took three years to fill these spots.

Responding to media criticism, Little told journalists that reporting of his statements was “baffling.” “I was asked about Labour’s policy on immigration generally. I said our approach was that as the economy slows there is a case to ‘turn the [immigration] tap down,’” he said. At the same time, he repeated his false claims that “large inflows of semi-skilled migrants” were putting pressure on jobs, especially in Auckland.

Various pro-Labour commentators defended Little. The trade union funded *Daily Blog* railed against the *Herald* for “bashing” Little over the issue in its March 19 editorial. Unite union leader Mike Treen declared that Labour had been “trapped into appearing as being opposed to migrant workers.” Chris Trotter told TV 3 that Little’s comments were a simple miscalculation. Labour is increasingly desperate to be seen in a “positive light,” Trotter said, and “if you push that immigration button, as we have seen in the United States with Donald Trump, you can get a reaction.”

Despite their posturing as “anti-racist,” none of the pseudo-left groups—the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), Fightback, and Socialist Aotearoa—condemned Little’s comments. In 2011 they all affiliated with the Maori nationalist Mana Party, which represents indigenous capitalists and is particularly hostile to foreigners, and falsely promoted its race-based identity politics as progressive. Claiming Labour can be pressured to the “left,” the pseudo-lefts advocate the return of a Labour-led government, with Mana as a partner.

Little’s positioning on immigration was no isolated incident or case of misguided populism. Since 2012, Labour has joined NZ First, the Greens and Mana in jingoistic campaigns against Chinese investment, including in the dairy industry and has blamed Chinese buyers for the expanding housing crisis.

The opposition of Labour and its allies to the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership has also been based on anti-foreigner sentiment and designed to bolster the position of New Zealand employers against overseas competitors. These campaigns, supported by Labour’s apologists including the unions and pseudo-lefts,

dovetail with their support for New Zealand’s alliance with US imperialism and its military build-up against China.

The Labour Party was steeped in nationalism and xenophobia from its foundation. After World War I, Labour, like its counterpart in Australia, campaigned for severe restrictions on Asian immigration. It 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. Under conditions of rising economic crisis, social distress and impending imperialist wars, the Labour Party is reviving these foul traditions.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact