

# New Zealand First proposes army training for unemployed youth

Tom Peters  
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On March 30, the right-wing populist New Zealand First Party MP Darroch Ball announced a private member's bill that would enable "youth as young as 15 to go into the army for job training" for three years.

Ball, a former army officer, said in a statement that the Youth Employment, Training and Education (YETE) Bill would address the problem of "over 70,000 young people aged between 15 and 24" who are unemployed and not in education or training. Although the scheme would be voluntary, New Zealand First envisages that thousands of youth would be enticed by the promise of free trades training.

The proposal is cynically presented as a solution to youth unemployment, which officially stands at 15 percent. Its real aim is to subject working-class youth to military discipline and channel rising class tensions produced by social inequality in the most reactionary, nationalist direction. Sending thousands of young people into the army would militarise society and indoctrinate them to support overseas interventions.

Such a scheme would be a step towards conscription, which would be imposed in the event of the outbreak of war. In the years leading up to World War I, New Zealand's ruling elite prepared the younger generation to fight by introducing military training in schools.

NZ First's proposal comes amid intense geo-political volatility produced by Washington's strategic "pivot to Asia," its aggressive and reckless military build-up and preparations for war against China. The world increasingly resembles the period prior to the outbreak of World War I and World War II, as the imperialist powers, led by the US, seek to offset their economic decline through the use of military methods.

The Australian government is preparing a huge increase in defence spending in order to assist its integration into the "pivot." In New Zealand, Labour

and National Party governments have strengthened military and intelligence ties with the US by sending troops to Afghanistan and Iraq. The spy agency, the GCSB, carries out espionage against China on behalf of the US National Security Agency. New Zealand has increased its participation in US-led military exercises, such as last month's drills in South Korea, and has invited US troops to train in New Zealand.

NZ First's YETE Bill fits in with the pro-war atmosphere being cultivated by the entire political establishment. The National government, supported by Labour, is spending more than \$100 million on events and exhibitions commemorating the centenary of World War I, in which 18,000 New Zealand soldiers were killed and 41,000 wounded. The purpose is to glorify NZ's involvement in order to prepare the population for future wars.

The YETE Bill has not yet been set down for debate in parliament and has received almost no media coverage. None of the parliamentary parties has condemned its proposal for thousands of youth to be trained by the army—an indication of the shift to the right by the entire spectrum of bourgeois politics.

Significantly, the only publication to report on the Bill was the *Daily Blog*, which is funded by five trade unions—Unite, the Dairy Workers Union, the Rail and Maritime Transport Union, the Maritime Union and the Meat Workers Union. It published an enthusiastic endorsement of the policy by Curwen Rolinson, a NZ First member who writes regularly for the blog, promoting his party's militarist and nationalist politics.

Rolinson described the YETE Bill as "a revolutionary concept" that would "teach the youths in question a trade and some skills, instill discipline through living in a controlled environment" and "turn lives around for thousands."

NZ First is a right wing nationalistic party, founded in 1991 on a platform of opposition to Asian immigration. In response to the deepening social crisis, the party has attacked immigrants from China, India and the Pacific Islands, including low-paid seasonal workers and foreign students. It also calls for a major increase in spending on the armed forces and tougher “law and order” policies.

NZ First been embraced by the opposition Labour Party, the Greens, the Maori nationalist Mana Party and the trade union bureaucracy. All three parties, along with the *Daily Blog*, supported NZ First leader Winston Peters’ by-election campaign last year in the Northland electorate.

Labour leader Andrew Little is courting NZ First and the Greens as potential coalition partners in the 2017 election. He has echoed NZ First’s attacks on immigrants, particularly those from China and India. Labour and Mana last year scapegoated Chinese people for the lack of affordable housing in Auckland.

The *Daily Blog*’s support for NZ First and its military training policy flows from the nationalism of the trade union bureaucracy. These organisations basically agree with the National government’s austerity measures; their leaders have worked hand-in-hand with big business to sack thousands of workers following the financial crisis of 2008, in the name of national competitiveness. The unions represent an upper middle class layer whose privileged position derives, in the final analysis, from the strength of New Zealand capitalism.

For more than a century the labour aristocracy has promoted militarism and xenophobia to divide the working class and assist the New Zealand ruling elite’s own imperialist ambitions. In World War I, leaders of the Social Democratic Party (which became the Labour Party in 1916) and the unions—like their counterparts in Australia and Europe—loudly supported joining the war as a junior partner in the British Empire. When mass opposition to the war erupted in the working class, the Labour Party sought to contain it with a limited campaign against conscription.

The first Labour government, supported by the unions and the Stalinist Communist Party, took the country into World War II, imposed conscription and imprisoned 700 conscientious objectors.

After WWII, Labour and the union leadership

whipped up anti-communist sentiment and backed New Zealand’s contribution to the Korean War and the ANZUS military alliance with Washington. In 1949 Labour reintroduced compulsory military training for youth, which was only ended in 1972 following mass protests against the Vietnam War.

The union-funded *Daily Blog*’s endorsement of NZ First’s army training plan, and the alignment of Labour, Greens and Mana with this chauvinist party, must be taken as a sharp warning. These pro-capitalist organisations are locking the country into US imperialism’s preparations for another world war.

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