

New Zealand Labour Party leader visits Iraq

Tom Peters
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At the invitation of New Zealand's National Party government, opposition Labour Party leader Andrew Little joined Defence Minister Gerry Brownlee on a trip to Iraq last week.

Little and Brownlee visited approximately 100 New Zealand troops who have been training Iraqi forces at Camp Taji for the past year. They also met Iraq's Defence Minister Khaled al-Obeidi and held talks with US and Australian military commanders.

Little's visit underscored, once again, Labour's support for the US-led war in Iraq and imperialist interventions across the Middle East. Under the pretext of a "war on terror" against Islamic State (ISIS), the US is seeking to cement its control over Iraq, while Syria has been turned into a hell on earth by civil war instigated by US-backed Islamist "rebels" to bring about regime change. The rise of ISIS has been fuelled by US interventions, from the 2003 invasion of Iraq to the 2011 NATO war in Libya and the proxy war in Syria. In Syria, the CIA and Washington's allies—Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar—have funded and armed ISIS and similar militias linked to Al Qaeda.

The Labour Party voted against sending New Zealand soldiers to Iraq last year, in deference to widespread anti-war sentiment. This opposition was revealed to be a fraud when Little, during a visit to Washington last December, declared he would be willing to send elite Special Air Service (SAS) forces to fight ISIS if the United Nations mandated the intervention. At the same time, Labour openly supported the bombing of Iraq and Syria by the US and its allies, merely expressing concern that this would not be enough without "troops on the ground."

Following his visit to Camp Taji, Little said in a press statement on April 28 that "Labour opposed the deployment because the Iraqi Army's track record was poor, even after years of training by American and

other armies." He did not, however, call for the New Zealand troops' withdrawal.

Instead, Little strongly implied that the deployment should be extended. "[T]he needs Iraq has won't be met in the two-year period the government set for the mission, and the government must now be open with the public about the demands being made of it and its plans," he said.

In an interview with TV3's "The Nation," Little gushed that he "saw some great stuff happening in Camp Taji, great work that our folks are doing out there." He described the two-year deployment as inadequate, saying "the American generals, the Iraqi minister of defence and his generals ... [and] the Australians who are there, they're all saying this [mission] is long-term ... It's not as easy as saying we've done some training, we're out of here, because there will be a vacuum left."

Little also declared that "the world has to push back on ISIS, certainly in Iraq. The next big challenge then will be Syria. Then you've got Libya, and you've got, you know, other parts of the Middle East."

In short, Labour is positioning itself to the right of the government. It is pushing for a lengthier deployment in Iraq and New Zealand support for other US imperialist interventions.

Labour's supporters in the media, including the trade union funded Daily Blog, have mostly remained silent on Little's trip to Iraq and his pro-war statements. Pro-Labour columnist Chris Trotter complained that Little had "compromised" Labour's "principled foreign policy stance." He called on Labour to demand the "withdrawal of all Western forces—including our own—from the entire region." Trotter has no principled opposition to the war, however. In July last year he called for a major Western military escalation to bring about the "utter destruction" of ISIS and the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad.

The Green Party, which voted against sending troops last year, made no comment on Little's embrace of the deployment. The Maori nationalist Mana Party and its pseudo-left supporters—the International Socialist Organisation, Fightback and Socialist Aotearoa—also said nothing about Labour's pro-war positions. These parties supported Labour's 2014 election campaign. The pseudo-left groups lined up behind US imperialism in Syria by fraudulently presenting the US-backed "rebels" as the leaders of a revolution.

The government is apparently preparing to announce an extension to its military deployment in Iraq, following a request by Washington last year for a greater commitment. *New Zealand Herald* political columnist Claire Trevett suggested on April 30 that Little was invited to Iraq in order to ensure "bipartisan" support for such a decision. She noted that the government similarly sought Labour's backing for legislation to expand state surveillance powers earlier this year, and arranged a meeting between Little and US national security chief James Clapper.

Labour, in fact, has played the leading role in strengthening the military and intelligence alliance with the US. The 1999-2008 Labour government, which was supported by the Greens, sent troops to Afghanistan and Iraq. Successive governments have overseen a major expansion in the spy agency, the Government Communications Security Bureau, which is part of the US-led Five Eyes alliance and spies on China on behalf of the US National Security Agency.

The entire political establishment supports New Zealand's collaboration with Washington's "pivot" to Asia, an aggressive strategy aimed at securing US domination over the Asia-Pacific region through the military encirclement of China. Along with the right-wing populist New Zealand First Party, Labour recently demanded a major increase in spending on the military, particularly the navy. The government already plans to spend \$11 billion over the next decade on new military hardware, including frigates and air force planes, in order to prepare the country for future wars.



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