

New Zealand: Labour, Greens sign Memorandum of Understanding

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's opposition Labour and Green Parties signed a one-page Memorandum of Understanding on May 31, agreeing to "work co-operatively to change the government" in the 2017 election.

The agreement describes the Labour-Greens alliance as "a stable, credible, and progressive alternative" to the conservative National Party, which has been in power since 2008. Commentators such as the trade union funded *Daily Blog* and former Greens MP and blogger Keith Locke presented the MoU as a shift to the left by the Labour Party.

In reality, the agreement is an attempt to trap workers and youth, who are moving to the left under the impact of the economic crisis, behind capitalist parties that have no substantial differences with National's agenda of austerity and militarism.

The 2011 and 2014 elections were marked by record levels of abstention, particularly among young people, reflecting widespread hostility towards the entire political establishment. Labour, which is widely recognised as no alternative to National, received its lowest vote in 80 and 92 years respectively. Over the past eight years the party has languished in the polls with 30 percent support or lower, and has had four different leaders.

Underscoring the collapse in support for the Labour Party, well-informed political blogger Richard Harman recently wrote that its membership might have sunk below 5,000, that is, lower than the Greens'. Tens of thousands of workers left Labour in disgust following the Labour government's wave of pro-market restructuring, mass sackings and privatisations in the 1980s, which led to soaring social inequality.

The MoU, which aims to prop up this despised party of big business, demonstrates once again the reactionary politics of the Green Party. Like its sister

parties in Germany and Australia, the NZ Greens are not a "left" alternative but a party of nationalism, militarism and big business. James Shaw, elected Green Party co-leader last year based on his experience as a business consultant for HSBC bank and PricewaterhouseCoopers, has described himself as "a huge fan of the market" and promoted Margaret Thatcher as a model environmentalist.

The Greens supported the 1999-2008 Labour government, including its decision to send troops to join the US occupation of Afghanistan, and the Australian interventions in East Timor and the Solomon Islands. Now the party has signalled its willingness to formally enter a Labour-led coalition government.

Labour leader Andrew Little addressed the Greens' annual conference on June 4 to promote the agreement. He declared that a Labour-Green government would "deliver a better, fairer New Zealand" that would "lift people out of homelessness." He made vague promises to reduce child poverty and increase funding for health and education. Little's speech was greeted with a standing ovation.

Neither party, however, has announced a policy that would lift the estimated 300,000 children out of poverty. Labour's housing policy, if implemented, would result in 10,000 new homes per year, to be sold at unaffordable market prices, while the Greens have called for the construction of only a handful more state-owned houses. More than 40,000 people are homeless. In the 2014 election both parties pledged to keep a tight lid on spending and ruled out reversing National's corporate tax cuts and its increase to the Goods and Services Tax.

In line with its previous tacit support for US-led wars, the Greens made no criticism of Labour's support for US militarism, including Little's recent demand for a

major escalation of the war in Iraq, Syria, Libya “and other parts of the Middle East.”

Foreign policy was not publicly discussed at the Greens’ conference because the entire political establishment supports the military-intelligence alliance with Washington, in exchange for US backing of New Zealand’s neo-colonial operations in the Pacific. Labour has openly endorsed the aggressive US “pivot” to Asia, a strategy to encircle and prepare for war against China.

Shaw told Newshub on June 8 that the Greens support the government’s plan, outlined in its Defence White Paper, to spend \$20 billion over the next 15 years on new military hardware, including frigates, aircraft and drones. Labour’s defence spokesman Phil Goff demanded that the government go even further in recruiting more personnel for the armed forces. The purpose of the increased military spending is to integrate New Zealand into US war preparations against China.

Shaw declared in his conference speech that the Greens and Labour wanted a future where “children of Syrian refugees will play with those of Chinese migrants, Pasifika [Pacific Islanders] and Tangata Whenua [Maori] and seventh generation Pakeha [Europeans].”

In reality, both parties have joined the right-wing, anti-immigrant New Zealand First Party in whipping up anti-Chinese xenophobia. Labour has blamed immigrants, particularly Chinese people, for taking New Zealanders’ jobs and driving up house prices.

The Labour and Green leaders have stressed that their Memorandum is not an “exclusive” deal and have invited NZ First to join them. The three parties contested the 2014 election in a de facto alliance, and last year Labour and the Greens helped NZ First leader Winston Peters win a by-election in the Northland electorate.

The Greens’ embrace of NZ First is a measure of their sharp shift to the right. NZ First was founded in the 1990s on a platform of opposing what it called an “invasion” of Asian immigrants. In June 2005, the Greens’ then-co-leader Rod Donald denounced Winston Peters as “the ugly face of New Zealand politics” and said his proposal for a dedicated squad to snatch and deport “undesirable” immigrants “echoes Hitler’s Germany.”

In May 2013, after Peters’ gave a speech scapegoating Chinese people for gambling, prostitution, crime and social inequality in Auckland, current Greens co-leader Metiria Turei told TV3 that Peters was a “racist,” but did not rule out going into coalition with NZ First.

On June 1, 2016, Turei told Radio NZ: “I have no concerns at all about working with Winston Peters and New Zealand First in future, if that’s what they’re interested in.”

Shaw went further, telling TVNZ on June 5: “Our relationship with New Zealand First has improved markedly over the course of the last few years. Metiria [Turei] has quite a close personal relationship with [Peters].” He pointed out that the Greens’ recently-appointed chief of staff, Deborah Morris-Travers, is a former NZ First member who served as minister for youth affairs in the 1996-1999 National Party-NZ First coalition government.

The Green Party leaders have built their “close personal relationship” with NZ First as the latter has made constant xenophobic attacks on foreign students, Pacific Islanders, Muslims and Chinese immigrants. Like Labour, NZ First supports the military build-up against China. It has called for greater military spending and proposed that unemployed teenagers undergo army training.

The Labour-Greens-NZ First bloc is not a progressive alternative to the National government. If elected next year, it will intensify the assault on the working class at home, attack immigrants, and continue the country’s war preparations against China.

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