

New Zealand unions intensify anti-immigrant campaign

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The *Daily Blog*, a website sponsored by five New Zealand trade unions, is waging a reactionary nationalist campaign against migrant workers. An August 7 article by Mike Treen, national director of the Unite union, rails against the “free availability of vulnerable migrant workers,” which, he says, is used to push down wages and keep New Zealand workers out of jobs.

Treen, who works closely with the pseudo-left Socialist Aotearoa group, is a former leader of the Pabloite Socialist Action League (SAL), which in the 1970s and 1980s falsely claimed to represent Trotskyism in New Zealand. With its demise in the early 1990s, ex-members took up careers in the unions, academia, the political establishment and capitalist state. Treen and the chairman of the Alliance Party, Matt McCarten, took over the small Unite union after the Alliance collapsed in 2002.

Treen’s article is his third in recent months calling for immigration restrictions. The site’s editor, Martyn Bradbury, highlighted Treen’s article as a “must read.” Bradbury declared that the conservative National Party government admits “tens and tens and tens of thousands” of immigrants each year to keep property prices inflated and make economic growth look better.

Like their counterparts internationally, NZ unions are responding to the deepening global recession by attempting to stir up nationalism and chauvinism as they collaborate with government and employer attacks on jobs, wages and conditions. The purpose is to divide the working class and divert attention from the real cause of unemployment and poverty—the capitalist system itself.

Last year the Tertiary Education Union and the Service and Food Workers Union joined the right-wing, anti-immigrant New Zealand First Party’s attacks on

foreign students. FIRST Union leader Robert Reid recently blamed immigration for leading to “fewer opportunities for local people.” The Labour Party and the Greens are calling for cuts to migrant numbers, with Labour leader Andrew Little holding immigrants responsible for “pressure on the road network, schools, hospitals and everything else.”

Treen contends that current immigration policy has created a “massive pool of vulnerable and easily exploitable labour,” taking jobs in cafes, retail, farming and care-giving away from New Zealanders.

Employers certainly use every means at their disposal, including pitting immigrant workers against their class brothers and sisters, to drive down wages and break up hard-won conditions.

The unions, however, have been instrumental in preventing any joint struggle to defend the interests of workers—immigrant and non-immigrant alike. For decades, they have collaborated with big business and government in imposing factory closures, job destruction and slashing of wages and conditions, all in the name of boosting the “international competitiveness” of New Zealand businesses.

The unions have established themselves as the prime enforcers of the austerity measures of successive governments. Since 2008, more than 5,000 public sector jobs have been eliminated without a struggle by any of the unions. E Tu, one of the largest unions, is collaborating with the destruction of the coal mining industry and thousands of layoffs at NZ Post.

McCarten and Treen identified young low-paid workers as a potential base and used Unite as their vehicle, posturing as a “left wing” and “campaigning” union. Unite positioned itself as the main bargaining agent in the fast-food industry, before expanding into cinemas, petrol stations, video stores and other non-

unionised areas.

Unite's highly visible but limited campaigns aimed to ensure that the groundswell of opposition among young people to low pay and exploitative conditions did not take a revolutionary direction. While these campaigns were trumpeted as "successes," particularly a 2006 campaign against youth wage rates and pressure on the government last year to ban "zero-hour" contracts, the overall position of young workers has not fundamentally altered.

In a revealing contract settlement in 2006, the Restaurant Brands group agreed to pay every union member a lump sum equal to 1 percent of their quarterly earnings every three months, essentially to pay the union fees for Unite members. According to McCarten, this was an arrangement in which "everyone wins."

The companies in effect granted Unite a franchise to recruit non-members—a vote of confidence in the union's ability to keep the movement among young workers under control. In 2014 McCarten became chief of staff to the then leader of the Labour Party, touting his credentials as someone able to reach agreements with big business.

Treen's pretence to care about the plight of migrant workers, along with his calls for "full rights" for those already here, is entirely duplicitous. Behind the scenes, Unite lobbies the government to keep immigrants out.

Treen revealed on the *Daily Blog*: "Occasionally, Unite gets consulted by MBIE [Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment] over whether a particular company's application for the right to bring in labour from overseas should be approved." In 2014, Unite opposed an application by SkyCity Casino to bring in 40 chefs.

New Zealand's immigration policy has always been exclusivist. Until the 1970s, an unofficial "White New Zealand" policy operated, initiated and foully promoted by the unions and the Labour Party, aimed at Chinese workers in particular. The unions also condone the harsh treatment meted out to Pacific Island workers, including the forced eviction of thousands of so-called "overstayers."

About 45,000 people gain residency each year, including 10,000 in the "skilled migrant" category. An increase in visa numbers last year resulted in 209,441 temporary workers being approved, many due the

Christchurch earthquake rebuild, and 52,000 people granted permanency.

The *Daily Blog's* demands for more restrictions has nothing to do with defending jobs, but shifts the blame for unemployment onto the most vulnerable sections of the working class. It is part of a conscious campaign to divert growing anger among workers into divisive nationalist calls for "jobs for New Zealanders first."

This is part of a broader turn to the right in response to the capitalist crisis and the drive to war, particularly Washington's military build-up in Asia aimed against China. Treen and other union leaders have been virtually silent on the government's integration into US war plans, but Socialist Aotearoa and the *Daily Blog* vilify China as a threatening "imperialist power." The *Daily Blog* has become a mouthpiece for anti-Chinese sentiment and economic protectionism. It recently joined the American trade union bureaucracy in blaming Chinese steel "dumping" and "trade war" for job losses imposed by the unions.

All these forces are lining up with the most right-wing sections of the political establishment. NZ First leader Winston Peters regularly denounces "mindless mass immigration" from Asia and depicts the government as subservient to Beijing. In November 2014, Unite invited Peters to speak at its annual conference.

The defence of jobs cannot proceed within the national framework. It requires an international struggle, uniting workers in New Zealand with those in the Asia-Pacific and throughout the world, in defence of their common interests, on the basis of a socialist program. To embark on such a struggle, workers must make a decisive political break from Labour and the unions and their nationalist, pro-capitalist and anti-immigrant perspective.



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