

New Zealand: Maori king cuts ties with Labour Party

John Braddock
17 September 2016

The New Zealand Maori king, the traditional figurehead of the central North Island Tainui tribe, used a speech on the 10th anniversary of his coronation last month to end his personal support for the Labour Party. Kiingi Tuheitia endorsed the Maori nationalist Maori and Mana parties, saying he would like to see the Maori electoral seats return to “Maori control.” Labour currently holds six of the seven parliamentary seats reserved for registered Maori voters.

Tuheitia blamed comments by Labour leader Andrew Little that he could not work with the Maori Party, which was established following a split from Labour in 2004 after the Labour government cut off tribal claims to the foreshore and seabed. The Maori Party, which currently has two MPs, has been a coalition partner in the conservative National Party-led government since 2008, providing “Maori” credentials for its offensive against the working class.

Maori, who make up 15 percent of the population, can register for either the general roll or the Maori roll at elections. Maori MPs can also represent general electorates and hold places on the party lists in the mixed-member proportional voting system. Calculations are now emerging in the Maori political elite that if a unified Maori movement can take the seven Maori seats, that bloc could be used as a lever to decide whether Labour or National governs.

Last month, the Mana and Maori Parties began discussions about working together in next year’s election. The talks are driven by ambitions within both parties for a more direct role in government. Neither would have any compunction in collaborating with any government to impose the next stage of the austerity agenda demanded by big business. Neither party has any broad support, particularly in the Maori working class, and face the prospect of electoral annihilation.

The K?ngitanga movement, which Tuheitia leads, is formally apolitical, but has traditionally been a bulwark of support for Labour. The king’s close relation, Nanaia Mahuta, has held the Hauraki-Waikato seat since 2002. After unsuccessfully challenging for Labour’s leadership in 2014, Mahuta was relegated to 12th place in Little’s caucus line-up, considered a slap in the face by the Maori political establishment.

In July, the Maori Party voted to install Tukoroirangi Morgan as its new chairman. A personal advisor to the king, Morgan is a right-wing figure at the head of the Tainui tribe’s extensive business operations. Between 1996 and 1999, Morgan was an MP for the anti-immigrant, populist NZ First Party. After losing his seat he joined Tainui’s corporate leadership, overseeing more than \$NZ1 billion in assets and investments.

Morgan immediately declared the Mana and Maori parties could co-operate to take the Maori seats off Labour and hold the balance of power. “I make no secret about it: that’s the agenda,” Morgan told the Politik blog.

The king also endorsed Mana leader Hone Harawira, saying: “Hone has the strength to fight for what he wants, he’s got the loyalty of the people he represents.” Harawira quit the Maori Party in 2011. After siding with National for two years he bitterly claimed the Maori Party had betrayed the people who voted for it. He established Mana as a new political trap for the working class, posturing as “radical” and “pro-poor.” Mana became discredited in the working class, however, when it allied with Kim Dotcom’s pro-business Internet Party in the 2014 election, which saw Harawira lose his seat.

Harawira welcomed Tuheitia’s comments, describing “unity” as “a core element of Mana’s very existence.”

Harawira claimed to oppose “the current government’s agenda of allowing the rich to get richer at the expense of the poor and the dispossessed, and selling off the nation’s assets,” even as Mana seeks “unity” with the Maori Party, part of that government, which has been instrumental in imposing austerity on the working class.

The possibility of a Mana-Maori Party alliance is being hailed by some pro-Labour commentators. The trade union-funded *Daily Blog* proclaimed that following the recent deal between Labour and the Greens to formally align for the election, the “only way we get a truly progressive Government in 2017 would be if Labour-Green + MANA-Maori Party had the majority.”

Far from being “progressive,” these are bourgeois parties, all lurching further to the right under the impact of the global economic crisis and drive to war. The Maori nationalist parties aim to block any movement to the left by the working class, while advancing claims by the privileged indigenous elite for a greater share of the profits and positions available within capitalism.

Tuheitia called for a Maori share in New Zealand’s “sovereignty” by 2025, implying a formal role for the Maori tribal leaderships in the country’s constitutional set-up. He promised to call another meeting of tribal leaders before the end of the year to pursue Maori property rights over fresh water sources, including those essential for hydro-electricity generation.

Under the rubric of “self-determination,” Maori leadership groups, such as the Iwi Chairs Forum, have backed successive attacks on the public sector in order to divert funds towards Maori trusts and business. This has included the drive to establish publicly-funded, privately-run charter schools and the Whanau Ora scheme, which has been used as a wedge to privatise welfare delivery.

Maori nationalism, the ideology of both Mana and the Maori Party, has been promoted by Labour and National governments over several decades. Its purpose is to divide workers along racial lines to prevent any unified struggle against austerity and militarism, and to subordinate Maori workers to the wealthy elite that Tuheitia represents. Treaty of Waitangi settlements—multi-million dollar payments to Maori tribes, ostensibly as redress for the crimes of colonialism—have enriched a thin layer of Maori

entrepreneurs who are deeply involved in the exploitation of workers of all races.

By 2013, Maori corporations owned \$NZ42.6 billion in assets, an increase of 15 percent compared with 2010. Tainui Group Holdings (TGH) has turned a \$170 million payment from its 1995 Treaty settlement into assets worth \$1.1 billion, rivalling the South Island’s Ngai Tahu tribe and Auckland’s Ngati Whatua. Its investments and holdings include farming, fishing, property development, a major retail park and hotels. When the government partially privatised state-owned electricity company Genesis Energy in 2014, TGH purchased 5 million shares. It owns the ground leases for the Huntly Power Station, Waikato University and parts of Hamilton’s central business district.

There is a vast gulf between the tribal elite and the Maori working class, which is mired in poverty and unemployment. According to researcher Max Rashbrooke in his 2015 book *Wealth and New Zealand*, wealth inequality within the Maori population is twice as great as among European New Zealanders. As the country’s economic and social crisis deepens, the appeals for Maori “unity” from Mana and the Maori Party aim to obscure this fundamental class division in order to prevent Maori workers from uniting with their non-Maori counterparts against the capitalist system.



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