

New Zealand: Ex-Green Party MP launches pseudo-left think tank

Tom Peters

27 September 2016

A new think tank, Economic and Social Research Aotearoa (ESRA), was launched this month in New Zealand with considerable media attention. The launch was held in conjunction with Victoria University of Wellington's (VUW) conference "Social Movements, Resistance and Social Change," which attracted 400 participants, mostly academics and trade union officials.

ESRA is led by former Green Party MP Sue Bradford and lists 19 founding members on its web site, including sociology professors and union bureaucrats. The web site claims it is committed to "combatting the political ideologies of capitalism" and "disseminating and popularising alternatives to capitalism and collective visions of a better future."

Writing in the *New Zealand Herald*, politics professor Bryce Edwards described ESRA as "potentially the most important leftwing project for many years." He said it revealed "a renewed focus on issues of economics and social class," rather than identity politics related to gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

These claims do not stand up to scrutiny. ESRA is led by a veteran capitalist politician. Its founders represent a definite upper middle class layer, including former Maoists, anarchists, environmentalists, Maori nationalists and proponents of gender identity politics, who are united by their opposition to the development of a genuine socialist and internationalist movement of the working class.

ESRA has been founded in response to the social crisis that has engulfed New Zealand since the global financial crisis of 2008. Health, education and welfare services are being starved of funds and tens of thousands of jobs have been destroyed. An estimated 41,000 people are homeless and one quarter of children live in poverty. The working class is profoundly alienated from all the major parties, particularly the main opposition Labour Party, which supports the government's policies of austerity and militarism. A million people, over a quarter of the adult population, did not vote in the last two elections.

ESRA aims to fill this political vacuum and divert workers, youth and intellectuals who are being radicalised by the crisis into channels that pose no threat to capitalism. In a Radio NZ interview, Bradford said ESRA aimed to "pull the parties [in parliament] to the left." In other words, it will encourage illusions that the Labour Party and its allies can be pressured to adopt progressive policies.

This perspective was underscored in a speech at ESRA's launch by Council of Trade Unions (CTU) secretary Sam Huggard. Huggard covered up the unions' collaboration in job destruction under successive Labour and National Party governments, including thousands of redundancies recently in the public service, among bank, postal, rail and airline workers, and at mining company Solid Energy. He hailed the unions' collaboration with the Labour Party's "Future of Work Commission," which is drafting employment policies to meet the needs of business for a more easily disposable workforce.

ESRA is partly funded by the trade union bureaucracy. According to ESRA's web site, it has 500 supporters, including academics and

unionists, and has begun "a first union-funded research project ... examining the work and living conditions of a particular group of migrant workers." Bradford, while professing sympathy for immigrants, has joined the trade unions in demanding cuts to foreign student and migrant worker numbers, telling TV3 on August 27 they were taking jobs from "New Zealand workers."

The "Social Movements" conference was co-sponsored by the CTU and the Public Service Association, New Zealand's largest union. It included dozens of presentations on environmentalism, Maori nationalism and gender politics, as well as topics such as media strategy and how to organise a protest.

One speaker was Annette Sykes, a leading member of the Maori nationalist Mana Party, which represents indigenous Maori capitalists. Mana was founded in 2011 with support from Bradford and the pseudo-left groups Fightback, Socialist Aotearoa and the International Socialist Organisation, which falsely promoted its racist politics as progressive.

Identity politics serves to divide the working class along racial and gender lines, to prevent a unified struggle against the profit system. At the same time, it is a tool for advancing the careers of upper middle class women and ethnic minorities within capitalism. The central political demand of Mana and other Maori nationalists is for increased government payments to Maori tribal-based businesses.

ESRA's politics are largely inspired by the Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government in Greece and Spain's Podemos party. In a seminar at Auckland University in March 2015, making her argument for the think tank, Bradford stated: "If New Zealand is ever going to build mass movements to take power in the way Podemos and Syriza are attempting currently, the role of academics will be critical."

Syriza was elected in 2015 on the basis of its anti-austerity rhetoric, only to betray the Greek working class within months and implement draconian austerity measures demanded by the European Union. Podemos defended Syriza's actions and is preparing to carry out a similar betrayal of the Spanish working class. Both parties have been promoted by New Zealand's pseudo-left groups, which aspire to likewise integrate themselves into the capitalist political establishment.

In terms of theory, ESRA is inspired by the postmodernist and anti-Marxist writings of figures such as Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau and Jacques Rancière. There were talks on each of these irrationalist philosophers at the "Social Movements" conference. Laclau, who influenced leading members of Syriza and Podemos, openly rejected any possibility of politics based on a scientific understanding of the capitalist system and the revolutionary role of the working class. Žižek, a major influence on ESRA academics Anna Maria Murtola and Warwick Tie, has become an ever more openly right-wing figure who rants against Muslim immigrants and refugees.

No speaker at ESRA's launch addressed the most pressing issue facing the working class in New Zealand and internationally: the immense danger of a third world war brought about by Washington's reckless

military interventions and threats against Russia and China. The first issue of ESRA's journal, *Counterfutures*, is also silent on the threat of war.

This is not an accidental omission: it points to the fact that ESRA has no fundamental differences with Labour and the Greens, which have welcomed the strengthening of military ties with the United States and the government's vast increase in military spending. Labour, the Mana Party, the right-wing populist NZ First and the trade unions have all sought to whip up hostility toward Chinese immigrants and investors, blaming them for job cuts and for pushing up house prices. This anti-Chinese xenophobia dovetails with New Zealand's integration into US war preparations.

Bradford: A capitalist politician

ESRA founder Bradford, despite being portrayed in the media as a "radical," has had a lengthy career in bourgeois politics. After almost a decade in the Maoist Workers Communist League, in 1989 Bradford joined NewLabour, a splinter from the Labour Party, which later became the Alliance. She left after one year. In 1998 she joined the Greens and was in parliament from 1999 to 2009.

In a letter to the *National Business Review* in November 1999, Bradford and fellow Green MP Keith Locke, a former member of the Pabloite Socialist Action League, renounced any connection with socialism, which they equated with "narrow agendas and bureaucratic ... models." They declared they had "moved on" and were "maturing and learning with age and experience."

The Greens backed the 1999-2008 Labour Party government of Prime Minister Helen Clark. The Greens formally opposed some of Labour's policies, such as sending troops to Iraq, but supported New Zealand's participation in the Australian-led interventions in East Timor and Solomon Islands, as well as the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. The party fraudulently presented these neo-colonial ventures as humanitarian "peacekeeping" operations.

Bradford played a significant role following the 2005 election as the Greens' economic development spokesperson. She led the implementation of a nationalist Buy Kiwi Made policy, to which Labour agreed.

Bradford worked closely with the trade union bureaucracy and the corporate lobby group Business NZ to implement the scheme, which was designed to boost the competitiveness of NZ capitalists against imported products. In a March 2, 2007 press release Bradford declared: "The campaign will celebrate and promote New Zealand innovation, entrepreneurship and manufacturing successes." The campaign offered grants to businesses to help advertise their NZ-made products.

Bradford heaped praise on the businesses that signed up to the scheme. In a December 7, 2007 statement, she said she was "delighted" that supermarket giant Foodstuffs had joined, saying this would be "good for our workers, our businesses and our communities." In fact, Foodstuffs, which owns the New World and Pak'N'Save supermarkets, employs some of the lowest-paid workers in the country.

The scheme did nothing to prevent the destruction of thousands of jobs in 2008 at companies such as appliance manufacturer Fisher & Paykel, Fletcher Building, Air New Zealand and timber giant Carter Holt Harvey.

The Clark Labour government presided over social inequality and poverty. It did not reverse the savage welfare cuts imposed by the previous National government or the privatisations and anti-working class tax policies of the 1984-1990 Labour government. Labour underfunded health and education services; it closed approximately 200 schools and oversaw a huge expansion in university student debt and hospital waiting

lists. Average household indebtedness increased between 1999 and 2007 from 100 percent of disposable income to 160 percent.

The corporate media greatly appreciated the Greens, especially Bradford, for propping up this pro-business government and providing it with a "progressive" veneer. In 2007 the *New Zealand Herald* named Bradford "Backbencher of the Year." The *Dominion Post* named her "Politician of the Year" and the *Listener* magazine listed her as one of the country's 50 most powerful individuals.

After failing to become co-leader of the Greens in 2009, Bradford resigned from parliament. On July 12, 2011, on the blog *Pundit*, she hypocritically denounced the party for its embrace of "Green capitalism." While claiming that she rejected "modern capitalism," she stressed that this "does not mean that I (or other ecosocialists of whom I'm aware) want a monolithic socialist state. Far from it. There are many options to build for a more democratic, participatory future ... I reckon some forms of market will always remain."

In the 2011 election, Bradford stood unsuccessfully as a candidate for the Mana Party, which she described as the "most exciting parliamentary political initiative I've seen in my lifetime." She resigned from Mana three years later after the party entered an electoral alliance with the blatantly pro-business Internet Party, founded by billionaire Kim Dotcom. Mana discredited itself in the eyes of the working class and failed to win any seats in the 2014 election.

Since late 2010, Bradford has also played a leading role in Auckland Action Against Poverty (AAAP), a forerunner to ESRA. AAAP has organised protests outside National Party events, carried out economic research and made submissions to parliament appealing to the government to reverse its cuts to welfare. The group receives funding from some unions and has helped promote the Mana Party and the Greens.

Over the past three decades, Bradford has played a major role in three capitalist parties: the Alliance, the Greens and Mana. While posturing as left wing and even socialist-leaning, these parties have all sought to politically disarm and betray workers by chaining them to the Labour Party and the parliamentary set-up.

Bradford's new think tank is seeking to play a similar role. Like the Greens and Mana, as well as Syriza and Podemos, ESRA represents affluent sections of the upper middle class that have a material interest in the exploitation of the working class. Under conditions of the most severe economic collapse since the 1930s, it aims to divert radicalising workers and youth away from revolutionary socialism and Marxist theory and into the reactionary channels of postmodernism, Maori nationalism, gender identity politics, Labourism and trade unionism. It wants to lay the ideological foundations for a new party whose goal, like Syriza in Greece, will be to preserve capitalism by betraying and suppressing the revolutionary struggle of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact