

New Zealand: International Socialist Organisation glorifies deceased Council of Trade Unions leader

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The October 14 death of Helen Kelly, who led the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions (CTU) from 2007 to 2015, has been followed by glowing tributes from the entire political establishment, the corporate media, and business organisations such as the Employers and Manufacturers Association.

Prime Minister John Key told TV3 on October 31 that Kelly “would have been one of the most worthy candidates” for the New Zealander of the Year award, had she survived. Several members of the opposition Labour Party noted that she was seen as a future party leader.

Kelly’s death at the age of 52 was a personal tragedy, but this fact must not be allowed to obscure an objective appraisal of her record. For more than a year, her protracted struggle with lung cancer was exploited in the media, with countless interviews and articles portraying Kelly as a champion for workers’ rights and as a national icon. In fact, Kelly is being glorified because she was a highly-valued servant of the ruling elite. She led the CTU as it collaborated with major attacks on the jobs and living standards of the working class.

In the light of the numerous accolades, the reaction of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation (ISO) to Kelly’s death was highly revealing. It published a three-paragraph statement on October 16 describing Kelly as a “brave” leader who “rejected the dominant narrative of bosses as society’s benefactors, and workers as beneficiaries, properly grateful for the boss’s largesse, insisting that workers’ contribution be acknowledged and rewarded and that their interests both in and out of the workplace be promoted.”

The statement completely falsified the role played by Kelly, whose career illustrates how unions have worked hand-in-hand with employers and the government to defend capitalism and suppress and betray the working class.

Kelly first became a union official in 1993 in the Early Childhood Union, which later merged with the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), the primary schoolteachers union. She then served as national secretary of the Association of University Staff (AUS) for five years before becoming CTU president in 2007.

The NZEI and the AUS played critical roles in subordinating

teachers and university staff to the pro-business agenda of the 1999-2008 Labour Party government of Prime Minister Helen Clark. Its education minister Trevor Mallard oversaw the closure of approximately 200 schools, mainly in rural areas. The NZEI never organised any political and industrial campaign against the closures.

As AUS leader, Kelly developed a close working relationship with Mallard and other government ministers. Under Labour, universities were systematically starved of funds and became increasingly reliant on private sponsorship and constant increases in student fees. In real terms, government funding per student fell from \$10,932 in 1991 to \$9,098 in 2006, according to the Vice-Chancellors’ Committee. Total student debt ballooned under Labour from \$3 billion in 2000 to \$10 billion in 2008.

The role of the AUS was to contain the growing anger among academics and other staff, and enforce the Labour government’s pro-market restructuring. When 79 percent of union members voted for a nationwide strike in April 2004 for better wages and more government funding, the AUS cancelled the industrial action and negotiated minimal pay rises, of about 4 percent, that were acceptable to the universities and the government. By 2006-2007, NZ academics’ salaries were still 44 percent lower than those in Australia and 14 percent below their British counterparts. The AUS took no action from 2006 to 2008 as job and course cutting began in response to the funding crisis at a number of universities.

After becoming CTU president, Kelly supported the Labour government against workers who opposed its austerity measures in response to the 2008 global financial crisis and recession. In April 2008 she denounced a 48-hour strike by junior doctors for giving unions “a bad name.” In July, the CTU refused to support a mass protest by 4,400 truck drivers against Labour’s increase to road user charges.

After the National Party won the 2008 election, Kelly and the CTU collaborated with the new government’s anti-working class agenda. Kelly had strongly supported Labour’s draconian Employment Relations Act 2000, which had been drawn up with input from the CTU. The National government retained

the legislation, which enshrined the union bureaucracy as enforcers of “productivity” and outlawed strikes except during contract negotiations overseen by the unions.

The CTU accepted job and wage cuts as a necessary “sacrifice” to keep businesses profitable. In February 2009 a dozen union leaders joined a “Jobs Summit” with the new National government and corporate representatives to discuss how to impose the burden of the economic crisis on the working class. Kelly declared that workers and businesses had a “mutual interest in each other’s survival” and assured the ruling elite that the unions were willing to “make some hard decisions and dedicating significant resources to working with employers, the Government and members to generate solutions.”

In their tributes to Kelly in parliament on October 18, Prime Minister Key and Labour leader Andrew Little both praised her role in negotiating a nine-day working fortnight scheme to cut costs for several businesses. This was falsely promoted as a means to prevent redundancies. Little also took part in the Jobs Summit as then-leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU).

As tens of thousands of jobs were destroyed by the government and private sector, the unions suppressed industrial action by the working class. Work stoppages fell to record lows of 18 in 2010, 12 in 2011, and just 6 in 2013, compared with more than 200 in 1986. The government also privatised power companies and introduced laws making it easier to sack workers during a 90-day “trial” period. By the end of 2012, unemployment had nearly doubled since 2007 to 170,000 people or 7.3 percent.

Most workers see no reason to join the unions, which have ceased to function as workers’ organisations in any meaningful sense of the term. In New Zealand, as in every country, the trade unions responded to the globalisation of production by ditching any reformist pretences. They have evolved into the open instruments of big business.

Under Kelly’s leadership, union membership declined from 376,769 in 2007 to 357,120 in March 2015, just 17.7 percent of the workforce. Membership has almost halved since 1985 as a result of the CTU’s acceptance of job cuts, pro-market restructuring and austerity under successive Labour and National governments.

The ISO’s statement made no reference to Kelly’s record of collaboration with the business elite. Instead, it hailed her involvement in prosecuting forestry businesses for workplace deaths and the ongoing case against Pike River Coal CEO Peter Whittall for his role in the 2010 mine disaster that killed 29 men. According to the ISO, Kelly fought employers who “put profits above the lives of workers” and “shined a light onto failed business practices which made these deaths inevitable and demanded and worked for change.”

This falsifies the role of the unions in both cases. In response to 10 deaths in the forestry industry in 2013, union officials

appealed to the government for better regulation and joined a business-led Forest Industry Safety Council, whose main activity is distributing safety advice to businesses.

The CTU’s strategy was hailed as a success when in 2015 there was just one death in the industry. As the WSWs explained, however, the decline in deaths coincided with a downturn in logging and the closure of dozens of small contractors. This year, following an upswing in the sector, there have been five more deaths.

The tragedy at Pike River mine occurred because the EPMU took no action to stop work at the site, despite numerous warnings about flagrant safety violations. Even after several workers walked out of the mine to protest the lack of safety equipment just months before the explosion, the union refused to call any strikes or even criticise the company. Following the disaster, then-EPMU leader Little immediately defended Pike River Coal, praising its health and safety practices and telling the *New Zealand Herald* there was “nothing unusual about Pike River or this mine that we’ve been particularly concerned about.”

One further falsehood should be noted. The ISO claims that Kelly “fought for ... new migrant workers.” In reality, the unions, along with the Labour Party and its allies, have sought to divide the working class and divert attention from their own role in job cutting by scapegoating immigrants and promoting nationalism. While mouthing concern for exploited migrants, Kelly repeatedly demanded cuts to foreign worker visas and attacked what she falsely labelled an “open door migration policy.”

The ISO whitewashes the CTU’s betrayals because it represents the same comfortable middle class layer as the union bureaucracy, which benefits at the expense of the working class. The pseudo-left organisation is hostile to the independent political mobilisation of the working class based on a socialist program. As workers and youth move to the left in response to surging social inequality and the build-up to war, the ISO seeks to chain them to pro-capitalist organisations including the unions, the Labour Party and the Maori nationalist Mana Party.

The glorification of Helen Kelly by the pseudo-lefts is aimed at preventing workers from drawing decisive lessons from decades of bitter experience with the unions. To fight against austerity and militarism, workers must carry out a rebellion against these organisations by establishing new rank-and-file committees that workers themselves control. These must forge links with workers in Australia, Asia and throughout the world, who are facing similar attacks, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.



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