

New Zealand: Labour candidate wins Auckland by-election amid low turnout

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The Labour Party's Michael Wood won a by-election on December 3 in the Auckland seat of Mount Roskill, which was called after the sitting Labour MP Phil Goff was elected mayor of Auckland in October and resigned from parliament.

Labour and its supporters in the media touted Wood's victory as evidence that the party is gaining support and could win the 2017 general election. Wood received nearly 2.5 times as many votes as the National Party government's candidate Parmjeet Parmar. Just two days after the by-election, Prime Minister John Key announced his sudden resignation, raising doubts on whether National can retain power.

The Mount Roskill result certainly reflects hostility toward the government, which is presiding over soaring social inequality. In Auckland, the country's largest city, a housing crisis is being fuelled by rampant property speculation. The average house price is over \$1 million. Thousands of people unable to afford skyrocketing rents are living in overcrowded conditions, or in garages and cars. Nationwide, 41,000 are homeless. While Mount Roskill is not as impoverished as parts of South Auckland, the electorate's median personal income in 2013 was \$27,200—about \$4,000 below the full-time minimum wage.

Above all, the results point to alienation and disgust with both parties of big business. Despite a highly visible campaign, voter turnout plummeted from 46,270 (73 percent) in the 2014 general election to just 16,857 (37 percent). This follows the similarly low 35.2 percent turnout in the Auckland Council election.

The Labour Party has lost three consecutive general elections by a landslide. In 2014 it received just 24.7 percent of votes, its worst result since 1922, amid near-record abstention by more than a million people. Labour is widely seen as no alternative to National.

Following Key's resignation, Labour leader Andrew Little praised National's response to the 2008 financial crisis, which consisted of severe austerity measures, an increase in the goods and services tax, tax cuts for big business, and attacks on welfare recipients. Labour agrees with this agenda.

The Labour Party strongly supports the strengthening of New Zealand's alliance with the US, including the decision to send troops to the current war in Iraq. The 1999–2008 Labour government joined the US war in Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq. Labour also backs Washington's encirclement and preparations for war against China and has criticised National from the right for not spending enough on the military.

Wood's campaign in Mount Roskill reflected Labour's right-wing politics. One of his central demands was for more police stations and 1,000 extra officers. In an electorate where half the population was born overseas and 39 percent of voters are of Asian background, Wood sought to scapegoat immigrants and “overseas speculators” for driving up house prices and placing pressure on infrastructure.

Wood declared during a public debate on November 9 that Labour wanted to slash immigration and ban foreigners from buying houses. Labour has joined the right-wing populist New Zealand First Party in repeated attempts to whip up xenophobia against Chinese people in particular.

The Labour Party was boosted in the by-election by the fact that New Zealand First and the Greens decided not to stand candidates. Green Party co-leader Metiria Turei stated in September that the Greens would not contest the seat because the party's “priority is changing the government in 2017.” Earlier this year the Greens signed a “memorandum of understanding” to collaborate with Labour, in the hope of joining a future

coalition government led by this pro-business and pro-imperialist party.

Last year, the Greens and Labour similarly stood aside to help New Zealand First leader Winston Peters win a by-election in the seat of Northland. Both parties, along with the Maori nationalist Mana Party, celebrated the victory of Peters, who has repeatedly launched tirades against Chinese, Indian, Pacific Island immigrants and Muslims.

Significantly, Labour's by-election victory has been celebrated by the pseudo-left groups Socialist Aotearoa and the International Socialist Organisation (ISO). Both groups, along with the Unite union, assisted Wood by denouncing National candidate Parmar for supporting the government's planned deportation of 150 Indian students. The students, after spending thousands of dollars to study in New Zealand, are being punished after it was discovered that India-based agents falsified their visa documents.

The deportations are outrageous and must be opposed. The pseudo-lefts, however, have used the issue to try to downplay Labour's own blatantly anti-immigrant policies.

In a post-by-election article, the ISO falsely stated that Wood's campaign had featured "none of the xenophobic [sic] Labour's been dishing out recently." While criticising Wood's demand for more police officers, the article declared that "on housing he pushed to the left, clearly campaigning to what's left of Mt Roskill's historic working-class communities."

In fact, Labour's major housing plan, promoted on Wood's web site, is thoroughly pro-business. The party would work with private developers to build 100,000 homes over 10 years, which would be sold at between \$500,000 and \$600,000—well beyond the reach of low-paid workers. Labour has no intention of undermining the profits of super-rich property investors.

The pseudo-lefts and the unions cover up Labour's pro-business agenda because they represent sections of the middle class that aim to improve their own position under a Labour government. In the past two elections, the ISO, Socialist Aotearoa and Fightback, and leading members of Unite, campaigned as part of the Mana Party, a capitalist party based on sections of the Maori elite and petty bourgeoisie, which hoped to enter parliament in support of a Labour-led government.

The pseudo-lefts are preparing to play a similar role

in next year's general election. Speaking at the Unite union's conference on December 7, national secretary Mike Treen advocated support for the "alternative government," which he described as a coalition of Labour, the Greens and potentially NZ First and the right-wing Maori Party. He promoted the parties as progressive, citing their hollow promises to increase the minimum wage by about \$4.50 an hour over several years.

In fact, a Labour-led government, if elected, would be completely subservient to the needs of big business. It would respond to growing geo-political tensions and the threat of another financial crisis by implementing deeper austerity measures, attacking immigrants and accelerating the military's preparations for war.



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