New Zealand Labour Party feud over candidate selection

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A bitter feud has erupted inside the Labour Party over the "parachuting" of former Alliance MP Willie Jackson into the candidates' list for the September general election. Jackson, who is Maori, was seeking to re-enter politics via the right-wing Maori Party before being recruited by Labour leader Andrew Little.

In New Zealand's electoral system, there are two ways of entering parliament: by winning an electorate, or via the party lists from which seats are allocated according to each party's overall share of the vote.

Little offered to place Jackson high enough on the list to give him a good chance of entering parliament. Labour's ruling council promptly granted Jackson a waiver from the rule requiring any candidate to have been a party member for at least a year.

The move provoked opposition inside Labour, particularly from those concerned that it would undermine the party's gender quota policy, aimed at ensuring 50 percent of its MPs are women after this year's election.

Christchurch MP Poto Williams issued a statement denouncing Jackson, principally on the basis of an interview he conducted on his radio program in 2013 with a teenage victim of sexual assault. Labour Youth members circulated an open letter citing this and Jackson's anti-gay slurs. Former MP and ex-party president Maryan Street expressed objections over the downgrading of "hard working" female candidates.

Pro-Labour commentators from the trade union-funded *Daily Blog*, however, rushed to defend Little and Jackson, accusing their opponents of jeopardising Labour's election prospects. The blog absurdly couched the conflict as a case of "identity politics" versus "class politics." Editor Martyn Bradbury lauded Jackson's recruitment, claiming it had inflicted considerable damage on the Maori Party while boosting Labour's stocks among working-class Maori voters. Columnist Chris Trotter contended that the appointment was part of Labour reclaiming its "original identity as the party for ordinary working people and their families."

In fact, the conflict is between two rival factions based on different brands of identity politics—on gender and race—that are equally reactionary. Jackson has been brought forward by Labour to make an appeal, based on his ethnicity, to Maori voters. It is in response to moves by the two Maori nationalist parties, Mana and the Maori Party, to form an electoral alliance in a bid to win the seven Maori seats, six of which are currently held by Labour.

The *Daily Blog* 's attempt to portray Jackson as pro-poor is preposterous. Jackson made clear his anti-working class credentials by initially aligning with the Maori Party, which has been part of the governing National-led coalition since 2008 and has played a key role in imposing its austerity agenda. In 2014 he backed an electoral alliance between Mana and multi-millionaire Kim Dotcom's pro-business Internet Party that was roundly rejected by alienated layers of workers and youth.

Jackson represents an urban-based section of the Maori business and corporate elite. Along with former Labour MP John Tamihere, he runs the Manukau Urban Maori Authority (MUMA), which has received millions of dollars from the government's Whanau Ora scheme and other programs.

Whanau Ora, devised by the Maori Party, allocates funds for health and welfare services to private organisations. Jackson also favours the establishment of more private charter schools for Maori. As a media commentator, Jackson justifies such socially regressive policies on the basis of racial identity politics: i.e., with

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the divisive assertion that separate services must be provided for Maori, by exclusively Maori organisations.

Jackson is making a phony appeal on behalf of Labour to the many ordinary Maori who have not benefited from multi-million dollar Waitangi Treaty settlements. The Maori elite is attracting growing hostility as social inequality deepens, alongside the vast wealth accumulated by tribal businesses—which exceed $NZ42 billion.

Jackson is now criticising the Maori Party as "besotted" with the Maori tribal elite, while condemning the "ferocious and increasing level of poverty in Auckland." He falsely claims that Labour is "committed to the poorest New Zealanders who have missed out from the rock star economy."

In fact, Jackson's criticisms are about redirecting money to the urban Maori elites and upper middle class. In a newspaper column re-posted on the *Daily Blog* on February 13, he revealed that Labour promised to channel more funds to urban Maori organisations such as MUMA. Jackson complained that currently "the funding is minimal" compared with "mainstream" public services.

Jackson is the second high-profile former Alliance MP to join Labour. Last year Laila Harre announced she was seeking a Labour nomination for an electorate seat. The Alliance was formed as a breakaway from Labour in 1991 by amalgamating four minor capitalist parties, including Jackson's Maori nationalist Mana Motuhake.

The Alliance's "left wing" posture served to block the mass movement of workers against the 1984–90 Lange Labour government, which initiated a far-reaching pro-market agenda—including privatisations and the restructuring of social services—that devastated working-class jobs and living standards.

The Alliance entered a coalition government with Labour in 1999. Harre was a government minister before the Alliance collapsed in 2001 after its MPs, including Harre and Jackson, voted to send SAS troops to Afghanistan. Harre has since established a varied and lucrative career in the union bureaucracy, as a human resources manager overseeing the Auckland city amalgamation, and as a restauranteur. In 2014 she led the election campaign for the Internet Party.

Under conditions of mass political alienation and social disaffection, Jackson and Harre are again offering their services to give a veneer of concern for the poor to the pro-business Labour Party.

Labour is widely seen as no alternative to the ruling National Party. The party has joined the xenophobic New Zealand First and the trade unions in demanding cuts to immigration and scapegoating Chinese people, in particular, for soaring house prices. It supports strengthening the police force and expanding the military to back Washington's build-up to war against China.

A member of NZ First, Curwen Rolinson, observed in the *Daily Blog* that whichever parties seek to form the next government, they will "have to work out some way to reach an accommodation with New Zealand First." According to Rolinson, Jackson is "seriously close" to the anti-immigrant NZ First leader Winston Peters, an avowed Trump admirer, and could play a key role in any post-election horse-trading.

For over three decades, Labour has been at the forefront of attacking the jobs and living conditions of the working class. Working people have deserted the party in droves and it lost the last two elections by a landslide. The current internal spat reveals the fetid atmosphere that prevails inside this hollowed-out party, dominated by bureaucrats and careerists. It is a sordid squabble over influence and positions inside a decrepit political machine

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