

Former police union leader to stand for New Zealand Labour Party

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New Zealand's opposition Labour Party announced last month that Greg O'Connor, the former head of the Police Association, will stand for the party in the Ohariu electorate in the September 23 election.

As head of the police union between 1995-2016, O'Connor has consistently defended police brutality and supported the militarisation of the police force. His selection demonstrates the right-wing, anti-working class character of Labour and its main ally, the Greens, which is supporting O'Connor by choosing not to stand a candidate in Ohariu.

The Ohariu electorate in Wellington had the highest average personal income in New Zealand in 2014. For more than 30 years it has been held by the conservative United Future Party candidate, Peter Dunne. Dunne was originally a member of the Labour Party. In 1995 he founded United NZ, which later became United Future.

United Future has formed coalitions with Labour and National Party governments. Dunne, the party's sole MP, is currently Minister of Internal Affairs in the National government. Labour calculates that if it can remove Dunne, National will be unlikely to form a viable coalition.

The Labour Party, which implemented sweeping pro-market policies during the 1980s including the privatisation of public assets, is deeply unpopular in the working class. It has lost the last three elections by record margins. It is widely recognised as no alternative to the National Party and supports the current government's agenda of austerity measures, including cuts to health and education, and increased military spending.

Labour hopes to form a coalition government with help from the Greens and potentially the right-wing, anti-immigrant New Zealand First.

The selection of O'Connor is part of Labour's plan to compete with National with right-wing "law and order" policies, including a pledge to train 1,000 more police officers. The aim is to divert attention from the social crisis for which the entire political establishment is responsible. At the same time, the strengthening of the police apparatus is a preparation to suppress popular opposition to austerity and militarism.

Between 1999 and 2008 the then-Labour government expanded the prison population by 36 percent and supported mass surveillance carried out by the GCSB, New Zealand's spy agency. It also passed legislation to arm police officers with Tasers, which are routinely used by officers, including against vulnerable and mentally ill people. O'Connor had long campaigned for the introduction of Tasers, and has repeatedly demanded that all officers should carry firearms. In 2011 the current government allowed police patrol vehicles to carry guns.

O'Connor's entry into political life is particularly chilling because of his unwavering defence of police violence. In 2006, for example, a group of four police officers savagely beat Rawiri Falwasser for 20 minutes, also dowsing him in pepper spray, after he refused to move cells. The Independent Police Conduct Authority ruled the officer's actions were "unnecessary, unreasonable, and unjustified." O'Connor opposed this finding, stating: "In hindsight [the officers] may have acted differently but at the time they were doing what they thought was best."

In recent years, the number of police killings has escalated markedly. In 2015 police shot 21-year-old David Cerven while he was unarmed in Myers Park in Auckland. Police refused to release details of the shooting, including security camera footage. Also in 2015, police shot 25-year-old Pera Smiler after he

presented a firearm in the Wellington suburb of Upper Hutt. Witnesses claim Smiler was preparing to surrender when police shot him.

In 2016 police killed 57-year-old Mike Taylor outside the township of Paeroa, in New Zealand's North Island. Taylor's partner claims that he was unarmed and that police did not order him to put up his hands. In all these cases, the Police Association defended the officers' actions. Following the shooting of Taylor, O'Connor said the public must "accept that police officers ... will more and more be having to make these decisions."

The elevation of O'Connor is being greatly assisted by the Green Party, Labour's main ally, which has decided not to run a candidate against him in Ohariu. This is in line with a "Memorandum of Understanding" agreed last year between the two parties to work together to change the government. Labour leader Andrew Little told Newshub on February 14 that this arrangement would be "very helpful to Greg O'Connor."

Seeking to distance the Greens from O'Connor, Greens co-leader Metiria Turei told the media she did not agree with any of his views. Her co-leader James Shaw denied that there had been a "dirty deal" with Labour. At the same time, Shaw cynically justified the Greens' decision by saying: "Look, if you want to change the government, then Ohariu matters and we're simply gonna stand out of the way."

The deal exposes the thoroughly right-wing politics of the Greens. Should Labour win the election, the Greens will bear full political responsibility for the strengthening of police powers and other authoritarian measures taken by the new government.

In recent years the Greens have joined Labour, New Zealand First and the Police Association in attacking the government from the right for not recruiting more police officers and for a so-called 'freeze' on funding the police. On June 17, 2015, Green MP David Clendon lambasted the government over what he called a 5.7 percent budget cut to the police since 2010.

The *Daily Blog*, funded by several trade unions, has also endorsed O'Connor and has published articles calling for a boost to police numbers. The blog's editor Martyn Bradbury said O'Connor's selection was "bloody smart" because he would appeal to "the working class, the poor and migrant communities who

bear the brunt of societal crime."

In fact, the open embrace of O'Connor and the police force by these organisations reflects their hostility to the working class, which is the main target of police violence. The Greens and the trade union bureaucracy represent sections of the affluent middle class, which are fearful that the ever-increasing social inequality and poverty will lead to the emergence of open class struggle. To defend the capitalist system, they support increasing the size and powers of the police and the military.



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