New Zealand's Maori parties sign election pact

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New Zealand's two Maori nationalist parties, Mana and the Maori Party, recently signed a co-operation agreement to prepare for the 2017 general election. The party leaders signalled their intention to "work together" to try to win all seven Maori electorate seats reserved for registered Maori voters. The Labour Party currently holds six of the seats, while Te Ururoa Flavell, the Maori Party co-leader, holds the seventh.

Under the deal, Mana will contest only the northernmost Te Tai Tokerau seat and will not be opposed by the Maori Party. Mana leader Hone Harawira lost Te Tai Tokerau in 2014, narrowly beaten by Labour's Kelvin Davis, while the Maori Party's candidate drew more than 2,500 votes. In return for boosting Harawira's chances of retaking his former seat, Mana agreed to give the Maori Party an uncontested run against Labour in the remaining six electorates.

The arrangement sees Harawira align himself with the very party he quit in 2011. At the time, he denounced the Maori Party for its role as a coalition partner in the ruling National Party-led government, declaring it had "betrayed the people who put it in power." Posturing as "pro-poor," Harawira founded Mana to exploit the growing alienation of workers and youth as the social situation, including in his own electorate, sharply deteriorated.

Before the 2014 election, Mana merged with multi-millionaire Kim Dotcom's pro-business Internet Party to form Internet-Mana. The cynical manoeuvre, a bid by Harawira to gain access to Dotcom's wealth and media profile, backfired. Internet-Mana secured just 1.4 percent of the vote.

As part of the National government, the Maori Party has helped impose cuts to health and education, destroy thousands of public sector jobs, privatise electricity and increase the regressive Goods and Services Tax. Increasingly unpopular among ordinary Maori, its parliamentary numbers fell from five in 2008, to just two after the last election.

The electoral alliance brings together two capitalist parties, both moving rapidly to the right under the impact of deepening social inequality and class tensions. A sharp increase in homelessness and child poverty is impacting severely on Maori layers of the working class.

Talks between the two parties began last July when newly-elected Maori Party President Tukoroirangi Morgan approached Harawira to put their "differences" behind them. Both parties have ambitions for a more direct role in government, whether National or Labour wins the next election. Both are prepared to impose the next stage of the austerity agenda demanded by big business.

The realignment is bound up with the needs of the ruling class for new formations to derail the growing opposition of workers and youth to the political establishment. The Labour Party, widely recognised as just as pro-business as National, has seen its support fall to record lows in the last two elections. Mana and the Maori Party are both based on the promotion of Maori nationalism which serves to divide the working class and block a unified class struggle against the ongoing attacks on jobs and living standards. Maori make up 15 percent of the population and constitute some of the most impoverished and oppressed social layers.

Harawira has emphasised ousting the sitting Labour Party MPs, advocating "a conscious and powerful [Maori] voice in parliament." Last September, the Maori king Tuheitia, the traditional figurehead of the central North Island Tainui tribe, endorsed the move,

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saying the Maori electoral seats should return to "Maori control."

Mana and the Maori Party do not stand for the interests of Maori workers and youth. Rather they represent the privileged stratum of Maori entrepreneurs, tribal bureaucrats, lawyers and academics created over the past 30 years through multi-million dollar Treaty of Waitangi settlements, ostensibly as recompense for the historic crimes of colonialism.

According to the government ministry Te Puni Kokiri, the Maori asset base totalled $NZ42.5 billion in 2013. This comprised $12.5 billion for Maori trusts, incorporations and other tribal entities; $23.4 billion for Maori employers, including major companies, and $6.6 billion for Maori self-employed.

The commercial arm of the South Island's Ngai Tahu tribe nearly tripled its assets in the past decade, from $561 million in 2006 to $1.5 billion this year. The second wealthiest tribe, Ngati Whatua, saw its asset portfolio, which includes major Auckland properties Quay Park and Vector Arena, rise by 22 percent in 2015, to $888.6 million. The Maori elites have accumulated this expanding wealth through the exploitation of workers of all origins.

Harawira used the resignation of National's John Key as prime minister last December to demagogically distance himself from the government and its supporters among the well-off Maori. "The only Maori who will mourn John Key's passing are those who clipped the ticket during his reign, those who reaped the benefits of Treaty settlements and corporate success, but did nothing to lift their own people from the mire of welfare despondency, drug-fuelled violence and suicide," he declared.

Mana's alignment with the Maori Party, a partner in the National government, underscores the duplicity of such statements. For all its pro-poor posturing, Mana has campaigned for increased funding for Maori businesses and the tribal elite, while supporting attacks on the working class and demands for jobs for "New Zealanders first." Mana has joined Labour, the anti-immigrant NZ First Party and the Greens in seeking to whip up anti-Chinese xenophobia and scapegoat Chinese people for the country's housing crisis and unemployment.

Both parties promote the reactionary nostrums of Maori identity politics. Harawira told *Mana News* that Mana and the Maori Party are committed to "the notion of Mana Maori Motuhake"—Maori self-determination—although "moving down that path right now is a bridge too far." Maori, once among the most militant sections of the working class, have been encouraged to turn toward tribal identification and demands for racially-established "indigenous" rights under capitalism.

The pseudo-left groups—the International Socialist Organisation, Fightback and Socialist Aotearoa—all falsely promoted Mana as a progressive alternative for the working class. They affiliated with Mana and supported the alliance with the Internet Party, campaigning for Internet-Mana at the 2014 elections, as a vehicle for integrating themselves into the political establishment. None has made any comment on the Mana-Maori Party electoral alliance.

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