

New Zealand Labour Party installs new deputy leader

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The Labour Party caucus unanimously elected Jacinda Ardern on March 7 as the party's new deputy leader, following the resignation of long-standing MP and deputy Annette King.

The 37-year-old entered parliament as a young "list" MP—i.e., without an electorate—in 2008. Ardern's promotion to deputy leader follows her victory in a February 25 by-election in the west Auckland electorate of Mount Albert. With a general election due in September, the ruling National Party, along with the right-wing NZ First and ACT parties, declared it a "safe" Labour seat and did not contest the election.

The result was a foregone conclusion. Ardern won with 10,495 votes, with the Green Party's Julie-Anne Genter second on 1,564 votes. Voter turnout was just 30 percent, following a similar historically low turnout in the Mount Roskill by-election last December.

Ardern has been portrayed by the media and the union-funded *Daily Blog* as the potential saviour of Labour's declining electoral fortunes. In fact, her election underscores the crisis that has engulfed New Zealand politics following the installation of the extreme right-wing nationalist Donald Trump as US president, which has further fuelled political instability throughout the world.

John Key, New Zealand's prime minister since 2008, abruptly resigned last December. He had been a champion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, which Trump has scrapped.

The parliamentary parties have all scrambled to adapt to the new international situation ahead of the forthcoming election. Labour and its allies are seeking new mechanisms to contain the growing opposition among workers and youth to austerity, attacks on democratic rights and the build-up to war. There is growing alarm over the deepening disaffection of

working people with the entire political set-up.

According to the *Daily Blog*, the "rise and rise" of Ardern represents a break with Labour's past and the 1984–90 Lange government's pro-business assault on the working class. *Daily Blog* commentator Chris Trotter proclaimed that Labour leader Andrew Little is turning the party to the "left" as the "old guard," represented by King, are sidelined. Little claimed Ardern is "the voice of a generation that is missing out most" from the government's "neglect."

To claim that Ardern represents a departure from Labour's right-wing, pro-market policies is absurd. She is a career Labour politician. The daughter of a police officer, Ardern worked in the offices of previous leaders Phil Goff and Helen Clark—both ministers under Lange. Goff, as tertiary education minister, was responsible for introducing New Zealand's first university fees.

From 2006–08 Ardern worked in London as a senior policy advisor to the Blair and Brown governments on small business policy and a review of policing. In 2008, she was elected president of the misnamed International Union of Socialist Youth (IUSY), the youth organisation of the Second International which demonstrated its reactionary character more than a century before by supporting the First World War. The IUSY is a training ground for the international labour bureaucracy.

In her 2008 maiden speech to parliament, Ardern espoused a belief in "human rights, equality, social justice" while evincing no opposition to Labour's attacks on all these principles. She lauded the Clark-led government of 1999–2008, which entrenched high levels of inequality during the course of a five-year share market boom and oversaw skyrocketing household and student debt. Labour also sent troops to

Afghanistan and Iraq, strengthening military ties with Washington. Ardern falsely claimed that Clark had made “good progress” in reducing poverty.

Ardern has not waged any struggle to defend jobs and living standards, nor has she opposed New Zealand’s deepening involvement with US imperialism as it prepares for war against China.

A focus of her election campaign was to demand more police stations in Mount Albert. As the party’s police spokesperson in 2013–14, Ardern attacked the government for supposedly “underfunding” the police. Labour plans to recruit 1,000 more officers and strengthen the force in anticipation of social unrest. With the Greens’ support, Labour recently picked former Police Union head Greg O’Connor—a defender of police brutality—to stand in the Ohariu electorate.

As Labour’s support has plummeted and the party has changed its leader four times, Ardern has risen rapidly through its ranks. In 2011 she became the fourth-ranked member of Labour’s shadow cabinet, although she has not held any major portfolios. Despite—or rather because of—her relatively thin record, Ardern is being brought forward to boost Labour’s appeal to the upper middle-class on the basis of gender politics. In 2013, Labour instituted a gender quota policy aimed at ensuring 50 percent of its MPs are women after this year’s election.

Ardern has been assiduously promoted by the pseudo-lefts, which represent the same privileged social layer. During the Mount Albert by-election campaign Socialist Aotearoa candidate Joe Carolan described her as a “wonderful person” and praised her work as an MP. In September 2015, Carolan introduced Ardern as a “left” MP to address a protest where she posed as a supporter of Syrian refugees. In January, Ardern spoke at an anti-Trump rally in Auckland where she denounced Trump’s sexist remarks and the threat to birth control rights. This is despite the fact that Little has committed Labour to work with Trump if elected.

Labour, which continues to languish below 30 percent in the polls, is a party of big business and war. While Ardern has voiced tepid concerns about child poverty and the housing crisis, Labour has no intention of addressing the social crisis that has unfolded over the past 30 years under successive National and Labour governments.

Calculations are already being made that Ardern

could, sooner rather than later, replace former union secretary Little as party leader. Recent polls have rated him at just 7 percent as preferred prime minister. As a potential prime minister, Ardern is clearly prepared to adapt to whatever is required by the ruling elite to implement the next stage of the assault on the working class and deepen New Zealand’s alignment with the US-led drive to war.

Labour already supports the current government’s cuts to social services, as well as tax cuts for the rich and an increase in consumption tax. It has joined the xenophobic NZ First, the Greens and the trade unions which blame migrants for soaring house prices and have called for cuts to the immigration program. Along with NZ First, Labour has attacked the government for failing to spend more on the armed forces.



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