

New Zealand Labour Party deepens anti-immigrant campaign

John Braddock
4 July 2017

New Zealand's opposition Labour Party effectively opened its campaign for the September 23 general election by announcing draconian measures targeting immigration. On June 12, leader Andrew Little said Labour would slash migrant numbers by up to 30,000—almost half last year's intake of 72,000.

While campaigning is not yet officially under way, Labour's salvo is an indication of the reactionary programs that all parties will roll out. The election will feature the same kind of appeals to nationalism, economic protectionism and right-wing populism that animated the US presidential campaign of Donald Trump and "Brexit" in the UK.

New Zealand's social crisis is among the most severe of the advanced capitalist countries. Overseen by successive Labour and National Party governments since the 1980s, social inequality has reached unprecedented levels. The country's two richest billionaires possess more wealth than the poorest 30 percent of the population.

In June a UNICEF report confirmed that the youth suicide rate—15.6 per 100,000—is the worst in the OECD. One in four children lives in poverty. Ten percent of children under the age of 15 live with an adult deemed "food insecure." Soaring house prices and rents, benefiting wealthy property investors, have made more than 40,000 people officially homeless. While insisting there is no money for basic services, the government last year allocated \$20 billion to the military for war preparations.

Labour's proposals are an attempt to cover up its own responsibility for this crisis while diverting growing popular anger in a poisonous direction by scapegoating foreigners for the worsening economic and social problems caused by the profit system.

Labour is trying to outflank the conservative National

government from the right. In April, National announced a policy to prevent migrants from obtaining a Skilled Migrant Visa if they earn below New Zealand's median annual income of \$49,000. Thousands of low-paid migrant workers now struggle to obtain a visa or residency because their work no longer counts as "skilled." Little denounced the measure as only "tinkering" with the immigration settings.

Labour is now proposing to go much further. In its sights are vulnerable foreign students who it accuses of "rorting" the student visa scheme as a "backdoor entry" to the country. Labour promises to end the ability of young people from overseas to work during and after study. Visas for vocational programs, those below a bachelor's degree, will be shut down, while new restrictions will be imposed on temporary post-study work visas. Further tightening of the bonus points system for the Skilled Migrant category will make it more difficult for people deemed "unskilled," such as retail and hospitality workers, to gain entry.

By contrast, Labour has not announced any changes to the "Investor Plus" scheme, under which wealthy migrants can gain residency by promising to invest at least \$NZ10 million. Controversy has dogged the recent granting of citizenship to US tech billionaire Peter Thiel, a prominent Trump supporter, who was exempted from residency requirements because of his "contribution to the country."

Labour's proposed crackdown on students and "unskilled" workers emerged from a campaign by the trade unions, which have revived their foulest traditions, dating back over a century, of blaming "foreign workers" for supposedly undermining the jobs and conditions of New Zealanders.

Unite, the Tertiary Education Union, E Tu and the

First Union have all joined the anti-immigrant NZ First Party over the past year in accusing migrant workers and students of putting pressure on jobs, housing, infrastructure and educational institutions. The Council of Trade Unions has endorsed calls to restrict immigration.

The xenophobic thrust of this campaign was highlighted in a tirade by the editor of the union-funded *Daily Blog*, Martyn Bradbury, on March 28. He fulminated: “The last bloody thing we need is MORE Chinese tourism bringing more hungry speculators into a country crippled by a lack of infrastructure investment and housing crisis.”

Little, a former union boss, has voiced similar positions. In March 2016, during a visit to the working class centre of Lower Hutt, Little cited Indian and Chinese chefs as examples of semi-skilled migrants allegedly taking jobs from “those who are already living here” and putting downward pressure on wages. Labour last year accused home buyers with “Chinese sounding names” of driving the surge in Auckland property prices.

Ramping up this campaign, Hone Harawira, leader of the Maori nationalist Mana party, told TV 3 last Saturday that “any Chinese” who bring methamphetamine or its precursors into the country should be executed. Harawira accused China of being the principal source of the illegal drug. The country’s pseudo-left groups have all promoted Mana as “left wing” and “pro-poor” since its founding in 2011.

New Zealand’s immigration policy has always been exclusivist, targeting Asian and Pacific Island workers. From Labour’s founding in 1916, the party was fiercely nationalist, stoking divisions in the working class by encouraging racism and xenophobia through the “white New Zealand” policy.

The offensive by Labour and its allies mirrors the campaign in Australia against “Chinese power and influence.” In both countries, the media and political establishment are fomenting anti-Chinese sentiment as the US builds up its military in preparation for war against China. Labour has been at the forefront of demands to align New Zealand more openly with the US military encirclement and threats against Beijing.

Labour’s immigration announcement was met with near-universal acclaim by the media. The *Dominion Post* on June 14 approvingly cited “liberal” academic

Paul Spoonley, who described the present level of immigration as “unsustainable.” The paper maintained immigration was causing “serious economic trouble” and Labour’s policy was “not racist or xenophobic” but a “careful and moderate” response.

Every wing of the political establishment is joining the clamour. The Green Party used World Refugee Day on June 20 to posture as “progressive,” announcing it would increase the annual refugee quota from 750 to 4,000 over six years. This is a drop in the ocean of global need. Last year, moreover, the Greens proposed capping migration at 1 percent of population growth, saying the government’s proposed cuts did not go far enough.

On the weekend, Greens co-leader James Shaw tried to change tack because of an outcry against the capping policy. He told the Federation of Multicultural Councils his party had abandoned this policy, and was now focused on “steering the public debate on migration in New Zealand towards values rather than numbers.”

The real attitude of the Greens is exposed by the fact that the party has formally agreed a joint economic program with Labour that will deepen the attacks on working people through increased government cost-cutting and austerity. Both parties are courting NZ First—a party that openly whips up anti-immigrant xenophobia—as a potential coalition partner.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact