

Labour Party leader resigns ahead of New Zealand election

Tom Peters
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New Zealand Labour Party leader Andrew Little announced his resignation on August 1, and the party caucus unanimously endorsed his deputy Jacinda Ardern to replace him.

Little's decision to step down less than two months before the September 23 election is the latest sign of the crisis wracking the capitalist political establishment. It followed three separate polls on July 30 and 31 placing Labour's support at between 23 and 24 percent. This was below the party's 24.7 percent result in the 2014 election, its worst defeat in 92 years.

Labour's support has collapsed because it is widely and correctly seen as a party of big business and militarism just like the National Party government. National is also deeply unpopular and does not have enough support to govern alone. Last December, Prime Minister John Key suddenly resigned and was replaced by Bill English, revealing tensions within the party.

Labour's main election pledges include cutting immigration by almost half and recruiting more police officers. Labour will not reverse National's austerity measures, including the partial privatisation of power companies, the increase in the Goods and Services Tax, and thousands of public sector job cuts. It also agrees with \$20 billion in military spending planned over the next 15 years, aimed at preparing the country to join US-led wars.

Internationally, the working class is increasingly hostile to all established political parties. Labour's equivalent in France, the Socialist Party, was all-but wiped out in this year's elections in response to the party's imposition of draconian austerity measures, its militarism and attacks on democratic rights (see: "Political lessons of the French elections").

In New Zealand there is growing anger over the social crisis, including deepening homelessness, the soaring cost of living, and a severely underfunded health system. In the last two elections more than a quarter of eligible

voters abstained. Among those aged under 29, turnout in 2014 was just 49 percent. A poll released last month by Ipsos found that 64 percent believe the economy is "rigged to advantage the rich and powerful" and 56 percent "say traditional parties and politicians don't care about people like them."

The replacement of Little with Ardern is the latest desperate attempt to revive illusions in the Labour Party and stave off a complete collapse. For more than 100 years Labour has served as the most important prop for the bourgeoisie, preventing the working class from turning toward a socialist alternative.

Ardern is the fifth leader of the party since 2008. A similar attempt to portray Labour as shifting to the "left," with the installation of David Cunliffe in 2013, was a dismal failure.

Like Cunliffe, Little has proven incapable of making any popular appeal. Before becoming Labour leader Little already had a long record of collaboration with big business as leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), the country's largest private sector union (now called E Tu), from 2000 to 2011. The union enforced thousands of job cuts and pro-corporate restructuring, including at Air New Zealand, NZ Post and mining company Solid Energy.

Little demonstrated his personal usefulness to the corporate elite following the 2010 Pike River mine explosion, which killed 29 men. He defended the company's safety practices, telling the media there was "nothing unusual" about the mine. It later became clear that there had been multiple warnings about life-threatening conditions in the mine, but the EPMU had said nothing and refused to take any action to prevent the disaster.

Ardern, 37, entered parliament in 2008. She became deputy leader earlier this year. She has been chosen to replace Little because, unlike every senior politician, she

does not yet have a decades-long record of attacks on the working class. Before becoming an MP she worked in the offices of former Labour leader Phil Goff and former Prime Minister Helen Clark, who have both contributed to entrenched social inequality and strengthened ties with the US military.

Corporate media commentators, liberal pundits and middle-class pseudo-left organisations have swung behind Ardern, hailing her elevation as an opportunity for the Labour Party to revive its support. TV3 political commentator Patrick Gower described Ardern as “powerful, composed, eloquent,” adding, “National should be frightened.”

Martyn Bradbury, editor of the trade union-funded *Daily Blog*, declared that “everything has changed for this election.” He described Ardern as “part of a generation that was taught empathy and compassion and consideration for others.”

James Shaw, co-leader of Labour’s main ally the Green Party, declared to the media: “Jacinda turns this election into a real competition... she’s got the skills, she’s got the leadership capability, she’s got the connection with the public.”

The pseudo-left groups hope Ardern’s installation will help them promote Labour as a “lesser evil” to National. In a statement entitled “Labour must change course,” the International Socialist Organisation said Ardern was “no left-winger,” but added: “Labour’s popularity with the electorate matters... If Ardern’s leadership helps get some momentum—any momentum—into Labour kicking National out then so much the better.”

In reality, Ardern has not proposed any substantial change and has praised Little and the Labour Party’s policy platform. She told Radio NZ she would place “extra emphasis” on some policies focused on housing, health and inequality, adding “I believe in free education.”

The party is currently promising three years of free tertiary education, but this would not be fully implemented until 2025, i.e. after three elections, making the pledge worthless. Labour and the Greens, which are campaigning as a coalition-in-waiting, have agreed on strict “fiscal responsibility rules,” including a pledge to pay down government debt and cap spending at 30 percent of gross domestic product.

Ardern told Radio NZ she considered herself a “democratic socialist” like US Democrat Bernie Sanders but quickly added: “I don’t think that’s a meaningful term in New Zealand.” Sanders gained support from

workers and youth in the presidential primaries by portraying himself as a socialist, only to then line up behind Hillary Clinton, the preferred candidate of the military and the Wall Street banks.

The elevation of Ardern, Labour’s second female leader, alongside Kelvin Davis, the party’s first Maori deputy leader, is an attempt to appeal to layers of the upper middle class on the basis of gender and racial identity politics. The media widely reported Ardern’s exchange with a newsreader who questioned whether she planned to have children. The *Guardian* said the exchange “sparked debate within New Zealand and accusations of sexism.” As in the US election, the purpose of the obsessive focus on gender is to divert attention from the fundamental issue of deepening social inequality.

Similarly, much has been made about Davis’ ethnicity. His installation, however, has nothing to do with helping the oppressed Maori working class, but is a clear pitch to the indigenous corporate elite. As the party’s corrections spokesman, Davis has called for greater involvement by Maori tribal businesses in running prisons. He also supports Maori-run, for-profit charter schools established under the current government.

In her first press conference as leader Ardern pledged to continue working with the Greens and the right-wing, anti-immigrant New Zealand First Party. On current polling, the three parties could have enough support to form a government after the election. NZ First leader Winston Peters is running a campaign similar to that of Trump; he has called for discrimination against Muslims and repeatedly scapegoated immigrants, particularly Chinese, Indians and Pacific Islanders, for the social crisis.

Labour and its allies are preparing to lead a government committed to deeper austerity cuts in response to the economic crisis, along with anti-immigrant measures, further strengthening the intelligence agencies and ramping up military spending to prepare for war.



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