

New Zealand election: Bipartisan agreement on war and austerity

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Today's election in New Zealand is forecast to be the closest since the Helen Clark-led Labour government was ousted in 2008. Since the installation of Jacinda Ardern as Labour's new leader on August 1, polls have gyrated wildly, alternately favouring the National Party government and a possible Labour-Green Party coalition.

According to a TV 3 poll released on Thursday, National has 45.8 percent support. With Labour on 37.3 percent, and the Greens at 7.1 percent, either camp could take office. Significantly, both major parties would need to strike a deal with the right-wing populist New Zealand First Party, currently at 7.1 percent, to form government.

The entire campaign has seen the vast dangers facing the working class and youth—specifically the accelerating threat of nuclear war—systematically suppressed by all the establishment parties.

This immense danger, highlighted by US President Donald Trump's threat at the UN to "totally destroy" North Korea, has remained the great political unmentionable. Since Prime Minister Bill English declared in August that he would "consider" joining a US-led offensive against North Korea, this stance has not been opposed by any party.

In the final televised leaders' debate on Wednesday, just hours after Trump's speech, there was no mention of foreign policy. The official opposition parties—Labour, the Greens, NZ First and the Maori nationalist Mana Party—along with the trade unions and much of the media, have prepared for joining US hostilities against China by promoting nationalist attacks on immigration and anti-Chinese "influence" on house prices and business investment.

The ruling elite is preparing far-reaching attacks, by whichever parties assume office, on the working

population at home and for war abroad. This bipartisan consensus was on display in the debate between English and Ardern. The event was not a "debate" in any real sense, but rather a friendly discussion between representatives of two wings of the political establishment.

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, the National Party government has carried out a deepening assault on jobs, living standards, public services and basic rights. English was allowed during the debate to assert, virtually unchallenged, that the housing market is expanding "faster than ever," there is no housing crisis and National is tackling social issues by "changing lives one by one."

Ardern had almost nothing to say about the depth of the social crisis. Aside from scapegoating immigrants, Labour's main housing proposal is to build 100,000 houses over the next 10 years, to be sold at unaffordable prices of between \$400,000 and \$600,000. This will do nothing to help the 42,000 people who are homeless.

The final week of the election campaign was dominated by reports of a crisis in the health system due to decades of underfunding by Labour and National governments alike. Severe delays for vital cancer surgery in Southland will shorten people's lives, while a baby recently died at Waikato because not enough surgeons were available to perform the caesarian section operation on time. Ardern criticised the lack of funding, but Labour's proposal is to inject only \$2 billion extra per year, well short of what is needed to meet existing need and provide for population growth and ageing.

Ardern focussed on assuring the ruling elite that Labour's policies are fiscally responsible and "fully costed." Her most animated remarks came when she

criticised National's "dishonest" attacks on Labour's tax proposals, which have included claims of seven new taxes, including on capital gains and water.

Ardern has ruled out any increase in tax to tackle severe social problems. Labour would set up a working party of "experts" to investigate a "fairer" tax system, she claimed, but any suggested changes would not be implemented until after 2020.

There is a discernible shift to the left among broad layers of the working class and youth, who are searching for an alternative to deepening inequality, child poverty and the housing crisis, for which all the parties carry responsibility.

To direct this into safe parliamentary channels, the corporate media, along with the trade unions and pseudo-left groups, have whipped up a wave of "Jacindamania," featuring false claims that Labour will address the social crisis. Ardern's elevation to Labour's leadership was a desperate manoeuvre to stave off electoral disaster, not just for Labour, but for the increasingly discredited parliamentary system. A million voters abstained in both the 2011 and 2014 elections.

Labour and the Greens have stuck to their commitment to "budget responsibility rules" which mean reining in public debt and returning fiscal surpluses. Neither party has put forward any policies that will significantly reverse the social disaster of the past three decades.

All Labour's proposals are fundamentally deceptive. Its pitch to young people to provide three years' "free" tertiary education is merely an "aspiration," that would be implemented only after two more elections, making the promise worthless.

On Thursday, Ardern promoted Labour's reactionary changes to industrial legislation, which would allow the trade unions to negotiate "fair wage agreements" across selected industries. While details of the policy are unclear, Ardern told Radio NZ it would help the unions work "collaboratively" with employers and the government to impose wages and conditions acceptable to big business. She stressed that her government, with the agreement of the unions, would "legislate" to remove the right to strike during these negotiations.

The Green Party and commentators on the trade union-funded *Daily Blog* have appealed to "progressive" voters to ensure the Greens reach the 5

percent threshold to maintain a presence in parliament.

In fact, like their international counterparts, the Greens are a capitalist party representing "environmental" businesses and oriented toward affluent sections of the upper middle class. Ardern was instrumental in a right-wing campaign to force former Greens leader Metiria Turei to resign over allegations she committed "benefit fraud" as a solo mother 20 years previously.

In Wednesday's debate, Ardern said the Greens would get Labour's "first call" in forming a coalition, but refused to discuss which Greens policies would be considered. She said any "conversation" would not imply a "stitched-up deal," leaving open the option of a deal with NZ First.

Key business leaders, anxious to suppress popular anger, have signalled they would be "comfortable" with a Labour-Green government. Mainfreight chief Don Braid told the *New Zealand Herald* on September 4 there is growing frustration with National. "I think they've [National] stopped listening to us. And I think they think they know better than us," Braid said. He heaped praise on Ardern, describing her as "visionary." SkyCity casino chairman Rob Campbell said "fear" of a Labour-Green government in the business community was "well gone."



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