

New Zealand First delays decision on forming a new government

Tom Peters
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Three weeks after the September 23 election, the make-up of New Zealand's next government is still undecided and a sense of crisis is engulfing the political establishment.

The Labour and Green Parties together have 54 seats, while the incumbent National Party has 56—below the 61 seats needed for a majority. Over the past week, Labour and National have both held highly secretive negotiations on forming a coalition with the right-wing and anti-immigrant New Zealand First, which received just 7.2 percent of the vote and won 9 seats.

On Wednesday, NZ First leader Winston Peters, designated the “King Maker” by the media, declared he would not announce a decision on Thursday as he previously indicated. Instead, NZ First's board of directors and caucus will assemble on Monday to discuss the alternatives and inner-party talks will continue until a consensus is reached.

The extraordinary delay points to profound divisions within NZ First over whether to join National or a Labour-Greens alliance. The party was previously part of a National-led government in the mid-1990s and supported a Labour-led one between 2005 and 2008.

There is considerable nervousness in the corporate media that whatever government is formed as a result of the anti-democratic backroom machinations will have no legitimacy. Apart from Peters and NZ First deputy leader Ron Mark, none of the party's 14 board members are elected. One Fairfax journalist wrote: “The next government won't be decided by voters—but by a faceless and secretive board.” A *New Zealand Herald* columnist commented: “Why bother voting? The election results are irrelevant.”

Before the election there was already considerable hostility toward all the parliamentary parties. Voter turnout was 79.8 percent, two percentage points higher than 2014, when there was near-record abstention of one

million people. The Labour Party, discredited by decades of attacks on the working class, was saved from another landslide defeat only due to a concerted media campaign to promote its new leader Jacinda Ardern, falsely, as a progressive figure. It still received only 36.9 percent of the votes, up from 25 percent in 2014.

Since the election, Ardern, National leader Bill English and Greens leader James Shaw have treated NZ First with great deference. None of them has revealed what has been discussed in coalition negotiations and what offers have been made to the ultra-nationalist party, which ran a Trump-style campaign focused on attacking Asian immigration.

The reason for the secrecy is that all four parties are conspiring against the working class. It can be taken as given that American and Australian officials are operating behind the scenes, insisting that the next government fully align with Washington's reckless preparations for war on the Korean peninsula and confrontation with China. Representatives of New Zealand's financial elite will be demanding that all parties repudiate their election rhetoric about addressing poverty and commit to deeper austerity measures and attacks on the wages and conditions of the working class.

The stage is being set for an eruption of class struggle and anti-war opposition. There are numerous warnings that a severe economic downturn could be triggered by a collapse in the housing market, a financial crisis in Australia, or a significant cut in immigration—which is the key policy of both NZ First and Labour.

None of the parties made the danger of war an election issue because they all support military ties with the US and membership in the US-led Five Eyes intelligence alliance. Nonetheless, significant divisions exist over how openly New Zealand should align with Washington and its military and economic offensive against China.

The National government has cultivated close business

relations with China, which is New Zealand's second-largest trading partner. So far, National has declined to echo Washington's denunciations of Chinese "expansionism" in the South China Sea, the pretext for US militarisation of the region.

NZ First and Labour have attacked the National Party from the right, calling for greater military spending and a more explicit alignment with the US. They have repeatedly sought to whip up anti-Chinese xenophobia by scapegoating immigrants and Chinese investors for spiralling property prices.

Days before the election, an anti-Chinese witch-hunt was launched, spearheaded by major strategic think-tanks linked to the US state: the Jamestown Foundation and the Wilson Center. The *Financial Times* reported anonymous claims that Chinese-born National MP Jian Yang was investigated by the Security Intelligence Service (SIS) as a suspected Chinese Communist Party "agent" because he taught English at Chinese military training institutions 20 years ago.

The Wilson Center's Anne-Marie Brady published a lengthy document asserting that Beijing exerts a high level of influence over the National Party government. She called for the SIS to use its anti-democratic powers to investigate anyone with links to the Chinese government, businesses, community groups and student associations.

NZ First has called for Yang to step down, an "inquiry" into his background and for measures to combat Chinese "influence." Factions of the National Party oppose these demands, and any reduction in immigration. National also would be reluctant to agree to any demand by NZ First for ministerial positions, such as Foreign Affairs—a post that Winston Peters held during the 2005-2008 Labour-led government. Such appointments would be viewed with concern in Beijing and could jeopardise diplomatic and trade relations.

Labour, the trade unions and sections of the corporate media have joined NZ First in drumming up anti-Chinese xenophobia and calling for a more overt pro-US position from the next government.

Yesterday a *New Zealand Herald* article warned that "our traditional allies," i.e., the US and Australia, were concerned about Yang's "rise to a position of political power," which it depicted as part of a sinister "soft-influence campaign" by Beijing. On Wednesday the *Herald's* pro-Labour Party columnist Bryan Gould echoed Brady's report and declared New Zealand was in danger of becoming "a colony" of China.

The absurd claim that Chinese investment and trade

constitutes the "colonisation" of New Zealand has been pushed by NZ First, the trade union-funded *Daily Blog* and pseudo-left groups. The *Daily Blog*, which expresses the right-wing nationalist politics of the union apparatus, declared Chinese "influence" would be "the major issue" after the election. It has published several articles promoting the Wilson Center allegations.

Along with Labour, the Greens and the Maori nationalist Mana Party, the *Daily Blog* has played a major role in legitimising NZ First's racist politics. It has set the tone for much of the media. On October 7, prominent TV broadcaster Duncan Garner wrote an anti-immigrant tirade for Fairfax Media, echoing statements by the *Daily Blog* that in 20 years "there'll be more Asians than Maori." Garner declared that Auckland now looked like "anywhere in South East Asia ... [full of] Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Syrians, and many others."

While many members of the public denounced Garner on social media, *Daily Blog* editor Martyn Bradbury defended him, saying he was "trying to articulate the frustration many Aucklanders's [sic] feel."

The racist filth propagated by the trade unions must be taken as a sharp warning of the assault that will be unleashed on immigrants, and on the working class as a whole, as the social crisis intensifies and the bourgeoisie deepens its integration into the US drive to war.

The only way forward is the building of a genuine socialist party to lead the fight to unify all sections of the working class, as part of an international movement against war and austerity, in opposition to the Labour Party and all its allies, including the trade unions.

The author also recommends:

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