

New Zealand: Socialist Equality Group meeting discusses new Labour-NZ First government

Our reporters
2 November 2017

The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) held a public meeting in Wellington on Sunday to discuss the right-wing character of the new Labour-Green-New Zealand First government and the need to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to lead the working class in the fight against austerity and war.

New Zealand First, a far-right anti-immigrant party that received only 7.2 percent of the votes in the September 23 election, finally decided on October 19 to form a coalition government with the Labour Party, ending nine years of rule by the conservative National Party government.

The meeting brought together an audience of workers, students and members and supporters of the SEG.

In the main report, leading SEG member Tom Peters warned that the working class faced great dangers. With the formation of the NZ First-Labour-Green government “a definite political shift has been engineered—a shift to the right, towards a more open embrace of US imperialism and militarism.”

He explained that the election outcome had to be understood in the international context of economic breakdown and the drive to war against China and North Korea.

During coalition negotiations following the inconclusive election result, Trump’s ambassador to New Zealand Scott Brown gave a televised interview in which he criticised National Party Prime Minister Bill English for saying Trump’s threat to rain “fire and fury” on North Korea was “not helpful.”

Brown stressed the importance of New Zealand’s role in the Five Eyes intelligence alliance and made clear that the next government would be expected to fully endorse US war plans, as the Australian government has done.

Peters explained that NZ First and Labour had been “at

the forefront of an anti-Chinese campaign for at least the past five years, attacking the government for allowing foreign investment and scapegoating Chinese immigrants for the housing bubble, low wages and other aspects of the social crisis caused by capitalism.”

NZ First leader Winston Peters, who now occupies the position of deputy prime minister and foreign minister, has repeatedly accused China of controlling the New Zealand economy and called for a McCarthyite “inquiry” into Chinese “influence” within the National Party.

Tom Peters noted that the Labour Party had also made NZ First deputy leader Ron Mark, a former army officer, the new defence minister. Last year Mark attacked the government for being “short-sighted with respect to what it takes to train and prepare for war.” He called for an air strike capability and drones to counter China’s growing presence in the Pacific.

The speaker noted that already the new government has announced it will expand a military-run pilot training scheme for unemployed youth, something NZ First and the trade union funded *Daily Blog* supported.

He added that “during a NZ First press conference on Wednesday, the party glorified Apirana Ngata, the well-known Maori politician who played a key role in convincing young Maori to fight and die in World War I and II.”

The SEG rejected any suggestion that Labour was a “lesser evil” to National. Peters explained that “the decision to grant such a major role to NZ First is the clearest indication of the reactionary, anti-immigrant, law-and-order and militarist program of the Labour-led government ... For 100 years Labour has been a pro-imperialist party that sought to divide the working class by scapegoating immigrants for unemployment and other social problems.”

Labour has already confirmed it would slash immigration by as much as 30,000 per year, or 40 percent. The new government's right-wing agenda also includes plans to cut tax for many businesses and introduce a work-for-the-dole scheme for unemployed people. To prepare for a surge in the class struggle, new anti-strike laws are being drawn up and 1,800 extra police officers will be recruited, an increase of 20 percent.

"Very quickly the working class will come face to face with the real agenda of the government," Peters said. "We tell workers bluntly that they cannot have any illusions in the Labour-NZ First-Green government. It is not an exaggeration to say that we are the only political organisation making such warnings."

The speaker drew attention to the embrace of Labour by a host of liberal commentators and middle class pseudo-left groups connected with the trade unions, including the *Daily Blog*, the International Socialist Organisation (ISO) and Socialist Aotearoa.

The ISO hailed the coalition deal between Labour and NZ First as delivering on a promise of "hope and change" and ludicrously declared that NZ First was "leaning left for now economically."

Peters pointed out that the ISO and similar groups internationally had hailed the election of Barack Obama in the US in 2008, and the Greek Syriza government in 2015. Both governments accelerated the assault on workers and handed more power to the military and police. Obama's reactionary policies of never-ending war abroad and austerity at home paved the way for the coming to power of Trump in 2016.

The report concluded by urging those present to study the history of the Russian Revolution and the Bolsheviks' intransigent struggle against every tendency that sought to compromise with the liberal bourgeoisie. The SEG is campaigning for a meeting to commemorate the Russian Revolution in Auckland on November 25. The meeting will elaborate the lessons of that great event, which must guide the building of a Trotskyist party in New Zealand.

The report was followed by a wide-ranging and lively discussion.

One audience member, a builder, said it "doesn't seem credible" that Labour and the Greens would support Trump's threats of war. If they did, the parties would be "pilloried by their activist base" and "wiped out at the next election," he said.

In response, a student noted that the 1999-2008 Labour government had sent troops to Bush's criminal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. "There were significant anti-war

protests at the time, but Labour didn't display much concern about what the protesters were saying," he said.

An SEG member added that there had been virtual silence on the danger of war during the election campaign, and none of the parties had ruled out joining a war against North Korea. Peters explained that Labour and the Greens had no connection with the working class and their "activist base" consisted of upper middle class careerists who supported the parties' imperialist policies.

A meat worker asked whether the pseudo-left groups supporting the new government could be described as reformist. SEG member John Braddock replied that they could not. He explained that the unions and pseudo-lefts were "trying to hoodwink the working class, to sell the illusion that Labour has reforms left in it. It hasn't ... Bourgeois parties cannot honestly and straightforwardly present what they're really going to do because the population won't accept it. It has to be covered up."

Two audience members asked how the SEG would address workers' illusions in Labour's promises to address poverty, such as raising the minimum wage from \$15.75 to \$20 an hour.

Braddock replied that this pitiful increase, which would only be reached in 2021, could not be considered a genuine reform. He stressed that such measures had to be exposed, as well as statements by NZ First and Labour leaders that capitalism had failed and needed to regain its "human face." The purpose of this pseudo-populist rhetoric was "to forestall a social explosion in the working class" and buy time for the bourgeoisie to plan deeper attacks.

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