New Zealand: Labour-led government promotes nationalism and militarism

Tom Peters
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In its first fortnight in office, the newly installed Labour-led government has made clear that it will advance a program of nationalism, anti-Chinese xenophobia and support for US warmongering.

The right-wing populist New Zealand First, which received only 7.2 percent of the vote, but held the balance of power, decided on October 19—four weeks after the election—to form a coalition government with Labour and the Greens rather than the conservative National Party.

Labour rewarded NZ First leader Winston Peters with the positions of foreign minister and deputy prime minister. NZ First deputy Ron Mark is the new government's defense minister. The right-wing party ran a Trump-like campaign focused on scapegoating Asian immigrants for the deepening social and economic crisis.

Labour and NZ First have criticised capitalism, reflecting acute nervousness in the ruling elite over growing working class hostility towards the entire social order, which has produced record inequality. Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern stated: "If you have hundreds of thousands of children living in homes without enough to survive, that's a blatant failure."

Labour is seeking to give itself a "progressive" veneer with meagre promises, such as a four dollar increase to the minimum wage by 2021—grossly inadequate given the soaring cost of living. Visiting Australia over the weekend, Ardern made a much-publicised offer to take 150 refugees from the detention centre on Manus Island. Canberra rejected the proposal.

The media, the trade unions and pseudo-left groups, are all promoting illusions in the Labour-Greens-NZ First coalition in order to trap the working class behind a capitalist government that will accelerate the assault on living standards, attack immigrants, and prepare for war.

While in opposition, Labour and NZ First repeatedly scapegoated foreigners, especially Chinese immigrants, who make up about 4 percent of the New Zealand population, for the housing crisis, low wages and other social problems. The government intends to cut migrant and foreign student numbers by up to 30,000 a year, or 40 percent.

The first item on Labour's legislative agenda is to ban foreigners from buying houses. Calculated to stoke xenophobia, the ban will do nothing to address rising homelessness. Rents and house prices have soared due to rampant speculation, overwhelmingly by local investors. There is an estimated shortage of 71,000 houses and more than 33,000 unoccupied homes in Auckland alone.

Labour's anti-Chinese campaign is closely connected with moves to align the country more openly with US warmongering. The Trump administration, escalating policies put in place by Obama, has demanded that US allies fully support the US military throughout the Asia-Pacific, in preparation for war against North Korea and China.

Following the NZ election, and before a government had been formed, US ambassador Scott Brown publicly intervened to stress the country's importance as a US ally. Brown attacked the National government for describing Trump's threat to annihilate North Korea as "not helpful."

NZ First has endorsed a report by the US government-funded Wilson Center calling for an investigation into Chinese "interference" in New Zealand politics. The party has also demanded an "inquiry" into National Party MP Jian Yang, who is being witch-hunted as a Chinese "agent" because he taught English to Chinese military intelligence cadets more than 20 years ago.

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While distancing New Zealand from China, the country's second-largest trading partner, Labour and NZ First have agreed to reopen trade negotiations with Russia, which were cancelled following the 2014 US-backed coup in Ukraine and the subsequent annexation of Crimea by the Putin regime. The *New Zealand Herald* commented that thawing relations with Russia would "position New Zealand alongside the Trump administration."

In another accommodation to Washington, the NZ First-Labour coalition agreement criticised the National government for co-sponsoring a United Nations Security Council resolution last year condemning Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territory. Trump vehemently opposed the resolution. The *Jerusalem Post* noted that Peters and Mark are "long-standing members" of the Parliamentary Friends of Israel group.

Pro-Labour commentator Chris Trotter told RadioLIVE on November 2 that Mark was "exactly the sort of person you want to have as your Minister of Defence: someone who actually knows what it's like to be in a fight."

Mark is a former NZ Army officer and also served, during the late 1980s, in the special forces of Oman, an absolute monarchy allied with the US. In April and June last year, he attacked the government for failing to equip the military "to prepare for war" and deter China's growing presence in the Pacific. The NZ ruling elite relies on US imperialism to support its own predatory, neo-colonial domination over much of the Pacific, where it views China as an unwanted interloper.

Mark's first action as minster on October 29 was to personally observe the biennial Southern Katipo military exercise, involving over 2,000 troops from New Zealand, Australia, the US and other countries. The nation's largest military exercise, Southern Katipo is designed to prepare troops to intervene in a Pacific island country to suppress civil unrest.

Three days later, in a speech to the Returned and Services' Association, Mark attacked journalists "who have never worn the uniform," for criticising military operations. This was an apparent response to the book *Hit and Run*, which exposed how the Defence Force and the National government covered up the role of elite NZ forces in a massacre of civilians in Afghanistan.

Mark also said he would visit Iraq "as fast as we can." Labour has reassured Australia and the US that it will keep more than 100 troops in Iraq, having ditched any pretence of opposing the war there.

The military will be aggressively promoted among young people. Labour and NZ First have agreed that the Defence Force's Limited Service Volunteer program for "young jobseekers" aged 17 to 25 will double in size, from 800 to 1,600 recruits per year. NZ First has repeatedly called for unemployed youth to undergo military training.

The government plans to build a new museum to glorify the World War II Maori Battalion, a contingent of 3,600 soldiers that fought in North Africa, Greece and Italy. The unit is lauded by the Maori nationalist Mana Party as "one of the feared military units" in the war.

During a NZ First press conference on October 25, the party glorified Apirana Ngata, the Maori politician whose face appears on New Zealand's $50 banknote. Ngata supported the Labour government's efforts in WWII to enlist young Maori.

Peters hailed Ngata for "telling young Maori soldiers going off to their death that that's the price of being equal in New Zealand." NZ First Regional Development Minister Shane Jones added: "That's the narrative that should be built into the Maori identity of New Zealand … It's going to be elevated."

These nakedly pro-war statements should be taken as a clear warning. The ruling elite is prepared to drag a new generation into even more devastating wars, demanding that they pay "the price of citizenship" by fighting and dying. The pro-imperialist liberals and pseudo-left groups supporting the right-wing, Labour-led government are seeking to cover up the immense dangers facing the working class.

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