

New Zealand: Labour government hit by sexual assault allegations

John Braddock
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In what is an ongoing media campaign, the New Zealand Labour Party has been embroiled for two weeks in a sexual assault scandal that has served to undermine the position of the recently elected Labour-led coalition government.

The claims of sexual assault stem from an alleged incident at a Labour Youth camp in February. According to *Newsroom*, which broke the story on March 12, four Young Labour members—two boys and two girls, all aged 16—told party officials that a 20-year-old man had put his hands down the pants of at least three of them during an alcohol-fuelled social event.

The media has seized on the allegation to attack the Labour Party. With the truth far from established, a replication of the reactionary #MeToo campaign has been under way. Anonymous accusations have been leaked to media sources, without any evidence or independent corroboration, and sweeping denunciations made.

None of the young people involved has been identified by name and no witnesses have been produced. The only “admission” came second-hand from Labour Party secretary Andrew Kirton, who told media that the alleged offender was “deeply embarrassed” when confronted about the incidents the following day. “My understanding from the conversation relayed back to me was that he recognised he had drunk too much and that he was embarrassed by what happened,” Kirton said.

Kirton added that party officials ejected the young man—labelled “the culprit” in one headline—from the camp and banned him from Labour Youth events. However, Kirton then faced mounting calls for his own resignation, including from the trade union-funded *Daily Blog*, for failing to tell the police, the teens’ parents or Prime Minister Ardern about the alleged

“assault.”

Police announced on March 14 that they will formally investigate the case after one of the teens contacted them. Yielding to the media onslaught, the Labour Party has now suspended all Young Labour events. Ardern and party president Nigel Haworth apologised abjectly, declaring that Labour had failed to provide “a safe environment for camp attendees.” Labour has also engaged a senior solicitor to conduct an “independent inquiry” into the incident and party’s procedures.

Apart from MP Megan Woods, who received a Facebook note from one of the teenagers, news of the incident was initially confined to the party hierarchy. Officials contacted the four young people and decided on a “survivor-led” response. At the young peoples’ request, their parents were not informed. Ardern, who had opened the camp, was not told, Kirton said, for fear the alleged victims would be “traumatised” by more people knowing.

While criticising Labour’s tardiness in responding, the head of Help, a sexual abuse support organisation, said the officials had followed the correct process. Spokesperson Conor Twyford told Radio NZ it was up to the victims to tell police or parents. All four were above the age of consent. Twyford emphasised that regardless of their age, police or others should only be notified by a third party, if a person was in danger of harming themselves.

The media, however, has deliberately inflated what appears to have been a minor incident into a major national issue for political purposes. The *Dominion Post* declared that Labour had “usurped the role of the law enforcers” over what it deemed was likely “criminal activity.” It repeatedly described the four youth as “children” and insisted that the “rights of parents” were sacrosanct. Opposition National Party

leader Simon Bridges accused Labour of a “cover up.”

The Labour-led coalition government, which includes the rightwing nationalist NZ First, has enjoyed a protracted media honeymoon since its formation following last September’s election. The corporate media has glorified Ardern, fawning over her youth, gender and pregnancy. It fully backed Labour’s rightwing political trajectory, including Ardern’s support for US president Trump’s threat to “annihilate” North Korea and threats against China.

On March 14, however, a *Dominion Post* editorial said it was “quite extraordinary” that Labour, which “appeared to embrace... the momentum behind the #metoo movement and the rise of young, ambitious women,” should have “got it all wrong.” Referring to Ardern, broadcaster Duncan Garner declared: “The golden glow and constant smile were never going to stretch through an alleged sex scandal involving young people and booze.”

The so-called “scandal” is being used to push official politics further to the right. Internationally, the reactionary #MeToo movement is cynically exploiting unsubstantiated allegations of sexual misconduct to attack basic legal norms and democratic rights and promote the material interests of a privileged upper middle-class layer.

In New Zealand, the Labour Party has previously advocated legislation to undermine the presumption of innocence in rape cases. In 2016, *The Daily Blog* called for scrapping trial by jury, based on the reactionary slander that the population as a whole condones “rape culture.”

Last month Fairfax Media’s Stuff website launched a “#MeTooNZ investigation” fronted by prominent journalist Alison Mau, to solicit “stories” from alleged sexual assault and harassment victims. Editorial director Mark Stevens promised that a team of journalists would produce “confronting” stories. This sets the stage for more trials by media based on unsubstantiated, anonymous allegations and sensationalised denunciations.

One thing is certain: the media’s insistence that “the gloss came off” Labour in the past two weeks has nothing to do with whatever did or did not happen at the Labour Youth event. Behind the hypocritical moral outrage is a growing impatience among sections of the ruling elite with the new government. Pressure is

building on Ardern to press ahead with the agenda for which she was installed—to deepen the attacks on the social position of the working class and step up preparations for war.



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