

New Zealand's "First Baby" fuels media frenzy

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27 June 2018

Over the past week, New Zealand's media held its collective breath as the due date for the birth of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's first child came and went. National celebrations were finally in order when the baby girl was born, four days late, on July 21.

Ardern, 37, is the second elected political leader to give birth while in office, following late Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in 1990. Since announcing her pregnancy on January 19, Ardern has become something of a global celebrity, appearing in countless interviews and articles in the international media, including on the cover of *Vogue* magazine.

An Instagram photo of Ardern, her partner Clarke Gayford, and the baby was posted from the bedside at Auckland City Hospital, accompanied by Ardern's message: "Welcome to our village wee one." This was a reference to her media statement in January that "New Zealand is going to help us raise our first child."

The birth of the child, dubbed "First Baby" by the media, was never going to be a private affair. The political gushing over the event was highlighted by the pro-Labour *Daily Blog*, which declared: "Our unwed Millennial working Mum, with the stay-at-home Dad, has given birth to a girl! That's a Feminist trifecta!"

The media made the birth an occasion for an outpouring of nationalism. Fairfax columnist Michelle Duff proclaimed that all 4.2 million New Zealanders were now the child's "godparents", and opined that "we as a nation, have pushed the boundaries and created an environment where this can happen."

The *New Zealand Herald* breathlessly reported that "CNN, BBC and the *Guardian* have alerted their millions of readers worldwide" to the baby's arrival, while breaking news banners had "popped up across multiple international news outlets."

In the UK *Guardian*, former NZ Labour Prime

Minister Helen Clark, Ardern's political mentor, asserted she was "breaking new ground." New Zealand "is showing that no doors are closed to women," she declared. Ardern and her family were providing "very positive role modelling for the empowerment of women and for gender equality," Clark wrote.

In the naming of her child, Ardern made a pitch to Maori identity politics. Maori elders from the Ratana church and the Ngāpuhi tribe in Northland had earlier offered Maori names. At a press conference on Sunday, the prime minister introduced her daughter as Neve Te Aroha Ardern Gayford. The name reflected the "love and generosity" shown by the tribal leaders, she said. Te Aroha means "love" in Maori.

Following the electoral collapse of the two Maori nationalist parties in last year's election, Labour is seeking to forge ties with the indigenous tribal and business elites, while feigning compassion for the impoverished Maori working class.

The orchestrated fawning over the "First Child" and the birth's purported global significance is designed to divert attention from the sharpening class struggle within New Zealand and increasing global turmoil.

The premise that Ardern represents an inspirational and "transformative" political agenda, moreover one that will bring the nation together, because of her youth, gender and now motherhood, is absurd. Her government presides over an increasingly divided society, implementing policies that benefit big business and the wealthy.

Thousands of "millennial" families cannot afford their own home, while the waiting lists for social housing grow exponentially. Labour has promised minor extensions to paid parental leave, but will keep the former National Party's draconian policy of forcing single parents to look for work once their youngest

child turns three, pushing thousands more people off welfare.

Researcher Dr Jess Berentson-Shaw wrote on Radio NZ's website: "In New Zealand over half of families experience income poverty for at least a year after having a child." That will certainly not be the fate of the "First Child."

Ardern and Gayford, a former radio and TV host, make at least \$500,000 a year and live in a different universe completely divorced from the conditions facing the vast majority of working people. The daughter of a former police officer, Ardern joined the Labour Party in her twenties. Her career has been bound up with the party apparatuses, both in NZ and Britain, where she worked for a time as an aide to Tony Blair's right-wing Labour government.

While she was in hospital, Ardern sought to try and quell anger among health workers by praising the care she received. On June 18, it was announced that 29,000 nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants had voted to reject the latest pay offer from the District Health Boards and the government.

Asked what she thought of a looming nurses' strike, scheduled for July 5, Ardern dodged the question and gave no support or sympathy to the health workers. "We need to make sure, in all of the things that we do—whether it's a pay round or it's health policy—we need to reflect the value of that workforce," she said.

For more than a decade nurses' wages have been effectively frozen, while living costs have soared. Hospitals are dangerously understaffed and overcrowded, and, as a result, thousands of people are missing out on essential treatment. The latest rejected proposal from the government included a pay increase of 6 percent plus 3 percent next year, a \$2,000 lump sum and a grossly inadequate 2 percent increase in staffing. Health Minister David Clark insisted the offer would not be increased.

Labour has ruled out increasing taxes on the wealthy and corporations to fund health and other essential services. Hundreds of millions of dollars, however, are being spent on the military to prepare for war, and on the police and prison system. The government's priorities are exposed in its promise to recruit 1,800 extra police officers, compared with only 500 additional nurses for the country's 84 public hospitals.

The working class, driven by global events, is coming

into direct conflict with the Labour-NZ First-Greens coalition government, which is continuing the austerity regime of the previous National Party government. Alongside nurses, thousands of teachers are seeking a substantial pay increase of 16 percent, and 4,000 public servants recently voted to take industrial action over low wages and poor conditions.

Working people should reject with contempt the efforts of the media to exploit the birth of Ardern's child to humanise a prime minister and a government that are implementing harsh and inhumane policies.



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