

New Zealand prime minister's false facade of "hope" and "kindness"

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The attendance of New Zealand's Labour Party Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern at the United Nations assembly late last month has been lauded as a triumph in media commentary at home and abroad.

Accompanied by her partner Clarke Gayford and three-month-old daughter Neve, Ardern was hailed as a fresh example of "positive and youthful" world leadership. In fact, her entire trip became a cynically-managed publicity opportunity aimed at covering up her government's pro-business agenda of austerity and militarism.

Ardern was introduced at her first engagement, the UN's Social Good Summit of "progressive thought leaders," as a beacon of "hope." New Zealand media outlets reported that she received star billing and was in "hot demand" for interviews on major US TV shows, including CNN's "Amanpour" and "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert."

The "charm offensive" was aimed at sections of the upper-middle class on the basis of gender identity politics. Media reports focused on the fact that Ardern is a woman and only the second world leader to give birth while in office. The *New York Times* described her as "the polar opposite of Donald Trump and other brash male leaders."

Throughout her formal duties and media appearances, however, Ardern avoided directly criticising Trump, who dominated the UN proceedings with a fascistic speech threatening Iran, China, Russia and Venezuela, along with the rest of the world, with trade war and military conflict.

Ardern told Colbert she did not join the other leaders who laughed at Trump's claims about his "achievements," but was merely an "observer." She used a brief discussion with the US president only to push NZ's claim for an exemption from his recently-

imposed steel tariffs.

On one of the major contentious issues at the forum, the bellicose US threats against Iran, Ardern would not be drawn on whether she would back a proposed European Union-Iran payment system to circumvent illegal US sanctions. Ardern dodged the question, saying she could not comment until she had been briefed.

Ardern's speech to the General Assembly was hailed in the NZ media as "taking aim" at the Trump administration. Her remarks reflected the alarm in the country's capitalist class over the potentially catastrophic consequences of the US measures against China, one of NZ's biggest markets. While not mentioning Trump by name, she decried the "catastrophic" decline of multilateralism and "false promises of protectionism" in trade, and criticised inadequate international efforts to tackle climate change.

Ardern, however, offered little more than empty platitudes. She declared that "kindness" was the key to achieving "the simplicity of peace, of prosperity, of fairness" and overcoming "isolationism, protectionism, [and] racism."

Perhaps saying more than it intended, the Wellington-based *Dominion Post* pointed to "striking parallels between Ardern and Barack Obama when it comes to their levels of acceptance at home and abroad."

Obama's campaign rhetoric of "hope and change," which NZ Labour has adopted, was a complete fraud. American workers quickly became disillusioned as his administration oversaw the multi-billion dollar bailout of the banks, the slashing of wages, widening social inequality and the escalation of military violence abroad.

Ardern's trip won a glowing response from NZ's

corporate elite, reversing earlier reports of falling business confidence. Referring to its recent “mood of the boardroom” survey, the *New Zealand Herald* said Ardern is widely regarded by big business as a “standout performer.” One banking boss declared: “Labour inherited a country that had been neglected for nine years. She is an amazing communicator and front person for the government.”

Acutely aware of widespread popular hostility to the entire political establishment after decades of attacks on social conditions and entrenched inequality, Labour and its coalition partner New Zealand First, supported by the Greens, took office last October promising to restore capitalism’s “human face.”

In its first year, however, the Labour-led government continued the previous National Party administration’s anti-working class program. Draconian austerity measures imposed following the 2008 financial crisis have kept one quarter of children in poverty and at least one in 100 people homeless, amid an out-of-control property bubble fuelled by wealthy speculators.

Economic indicators point to a gathering crisis. Former Reserve Bank governor Alan Bollard warned in the *Listener* last month that global trade frictions threaten to “weaken exchange rates, hurt commodity prices, hit stock markets or cause financial volatility, against an unusual background of tightening monetary policy and loose fiscal policy in the US.”

In her UN speech, Ardern hypocritically called for an end to the “gender pay gap” and “over-representation of women in low-paid work.” In fact, her government’s refusal to address low wages and drastic underfunding in health, education and other areas has prompted the biggest wave of strikes and industrial action in many years. Thousands of teachers and nurses have held nationwide strikes. Ardern’s visit to the UN coincided with a vote by primary teachers to reject her government’s second grossly inadequate pay offer.

As in other countries, faced with deteriorating economic conditions and mounting unrest over wages and living standards, the political establishment is shifting to the right, promoting nationalism and xenophobia to divide the working class and prepare for war.

Labour relies on the support of the Trump-like, anti-immigrant and nationalist NZ First Party, which won just 7 percent of the popular vote at the election. Two

leading members of this anti-Asian, anti-Muslim, militarist party were given the roles of foreign minister, defence minister and deputy prime minister.

The week before Ardern headed to the UN, one of Labour’s election promises—to increase the refugee quota from 1,000 to 1,500—was put in doubt after NZ First leader Winston Peters flatly declared there was no commitment in the coalition agreement to raise the quota. The miserly increase was eventually approved, but only on the condition that overall immigration numbers would continue to be sharply reduced.

Labour and NZ First have engaged in a long-running chauvinist campaign against foreign workers and Chinese “influence,” while banning house sales to foreign buyers and cracking down on work visas for overseas students.

Labour fundamentally agrees with NZ First’s policies, including cuts to immigration, economic nationalism, intensified New Zealand imperialist operations in the Pacific and support for the US military alliance. Military deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan have been extended. New Zealand last month joined Australia in deploying an Air Force maritime patrol aircraft to help implement sanctions against North Korea, placing NZ troops on the front lines should a war break out between the US and North Korea or China.

Labour is relying on the trade unions to suppress a broadening movement of the working class, including nurses, transport workers, public servants and teachers over low pay and working conditions. The unions have worked overtime to isolate each section of workers coming into struggle and enforce the government’s fiscal constraints.

Working people who voted Labour at the last election, or abstained from voting, are quickly discovering that the party’s promises to address inequality, child poverty and low wages were completely hollow.



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