Sexual assault scandal shakes New Zealand government

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Last month New Zealand's ruling Labour Party was thrown into crisis over #MeToo-style allegations of sexual assault. The claims were first made public on August 5 when *Newshub* reported that seven unidentified Labour Party members had laid internal complaints in 2018, accusing "a senior Labour staffer of unacceptable behaviour ranging from bullying and intimidation to sexual harassment and sexual assault."

The complainants went to the media after Labour's president Nigel Haworth informed them in July, following an internal investigation, that the party would take "no disciplinary action" against the accused man. On August 9, opposition National Party deputy leader Paula Bennett told *Newstalk ZB* some complainants had approached her to put "pressure" on the government to act. She accused the Labour Party of orchestrating "a cover-up" and "protecting the alleged perpetrator."

The public has no way of knowing the truth or falsehood of any of the claims being made. None of the alleged victims has publicly identified themselves, nor has the accused been identified. Despite the seriousness of the allegations, no complaint has been made to police. Instead, the complainants went first to the Labour Party president, then to the media and the right-wing National Party, NZ's second party of big business and Labour's main opposition in parliament.

The media and political furore escalated on September 9 after the *Spinoff* published a 4,000-word article which described the alleged rape of a 19-year-old Labour volunteer by the staffer. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told the media she was previously told that the allegations were "not sexual in nature." Bennett and National leader Simon Bridges, along with several media commentators, accused Ardern of lying.

In an attempt to shut down the story, Ardern apologised over the party's handling of the allegations and Haworth resigned on September 11. The accused staffer, who reportedly worked closely with Ardern and Finance Minister Grant Robertson, also resigned. Both Haworth and the staffer maintained that they had done nothing wrong. Labour has hired a lawyer to conduct a fresh investigation into the original complaints, which Ardern promised is "independent" of the party.

This entire process is thoroughly anti-democratic. It fits the pattern of #MeToo scandals internationally, in which anonymous allegations made in the media are treated as fact. Numerous well-known individuals, actors, musicians, authors and politicians have had their careers seriously damaged or destroyed without due legal process.

Right-wing commentator Matthew Hooton, a prominent figure whipping up the scandal, praised #MeToo on *Magic Talk* on August 13, declaring "one of the things you're meant to do is believe the women."

The government has helped to create the climate for such attacks. Ardern gave a much-publicised endorsement of #MeToo at the United Nations General Assembly last year. The NZ Labour Party has advocated a law to remove the presumption of innocence until proven guilty in rape cases, if it is established that a sex act occurred.

National leader Bridges, a former prosecutor, was asked in one TV interview why no one had gone to the police. He replied that this was probably because prosecutions for sexual assault often did not result in a conviction, because they are difficult to prove. In other words, the complainants decided not to undergo a process that would give the accused the chance to respond in court, and test and potentially discredit their allegations.

Where #MeToo claims have been tested in court, they

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have frequently fallen apart, as in Geoffrey Rush's successful defamation case against the *Daily Telegraph* in Australia, the recent acquittal of actor John Jarratt on rape charges and the implosion of the charges against Kevin Spacey in the US.

Reportedly, the New Zealand complainants at first wanted the investigation handled internally so as not to damage the government. However, the issue was blown up into the most severe crisis facing Ardern and the Labour Party leadership and forced the resignation of two prominent party members. This sets a precedent for more resignations or sackings based on unproven, anonymous allegations.

According to a *Stuff* article on September 15, the "survivor group" wants to meet with Ardern and is demanding "sexual harassment prevention and disclosure handling training" for party staff. One member of the group criticised the party as "not only male-dominated, but incredibly white," implying that more women and non-white party members should be promoted. Such measures, based on middle class identity politics, would benefit a small number of careerists without changing the Labour Party's pro-business austerity agenda.

At this point, the larger political motivations behind the attacks on the Ardern government over the scandal are unclear. Throughout history, sex scandals have been used by sections of the ruling elite to discipline governments to carry out their demands, to settle scores and effect changes of personnel, all while keeping the real issues concealed from public view.

The scandal coincided with growing dissatisfaction with the government in ruling circles. Business confidence fell by 35 percent in the September quarter to its lowest level since 2009, immediately after the global financial crash, according to the New Zealand Institute for Economic Research. This was followed by widely-publicised *One News* and *Newshub* polls this month showing the Labour Party's support dropped several points to 40 and 41.6 percent, with National ahead on 47 and 43.9 percent respectively.

The collapse in business support is fuelled by doubts over Labour's ability to suppress the sharpening class struggle, produced by soaring social inequality. Labour has betrayed its 2017 election promises to reduce poverty and homelessness, which has reached record levels, and address the crisis in hospitals and schools. There has been a wave of nationwide strikes against austerity, involving tens of thousands of nurses, doctors and teachers, along with other healthcare workers in particular.

The sex assault allegations were a gift to the National Party, which played a major role in stoking the media frenzy against Ardern and Finance Minister Robertson. The issue served to divert attention from National's own crisis, which stems from sharp differences with the government over foreign policy.

The National Party favours closer links with China, New Zealand's largest trading partner, while the Labour-NZ First-Greens coalition has strengthened NZ's alignment with US war preparations aimed against China. Throughout August and early September the government and media relentlessly attacked the National Party for receiving large donations from Chinese businessmen. Bridges was denounced for praising the Chinese government during a trip to Beijing. The explosion within the Labour Party temporarily drowned out the anti-China campaign in the media.

The differences which exist between the two major bourgeois parties are tactical. They are united in imposing the full burden of the crisis of NZ capitalism onto the backs of the working class.

Whatever the outcome of the new investigation currently underway into the Labour Party's handling of the allegations, one thing is certain: the sexual assault claims are not the fundamental source of the crisis facing the Ardern government.

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