

New Zealand: Pseudo-left ISO promotes illusions in right-wing Labour-led government

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Following Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's announcement that an election will be held on September 19, the International Socialist Organisation (ISO) published an article on January 29 providing the Labour Party-Greens-NZ First government with political support and advice for its re-election campaign.

After two-and-a-half years in office, the Ardern government has failed to fulfil its promises to alleviate poverty and worsening homelessness, which the UN recently described as a "human rights crisis." It has continued to starve public healthcare, education and other essential services of funding, while funnelling billions of dollars to the military, police and intelligence agencies. Along with its coalition partner, the anti-immigrant NZ First, Labour is preparing for another election campaign based on promoting nationalism and xenophobia.

New Zealand workers, like their counterparts throughout the world, have begun to fight back, demanding that the government end austerity and increase wages. Teachers and nurses have staged nationwide strikes, only to have their struggles betrayed by the trade union bureaucracy (see: "The right-wing record of Jacinda Ardern's government").

Under these conditions the ISO and other pseudo-left groups, having backed Labour and the Greens in the 2017 election, are desperately seeking to convince workers and young people—who are moving to the left and increasingly sympathetic to socialism—to have faith in these parties.

The January 29 article by Keith Davies, entitled "The Fourth Labour government and the destruction of the welfare state," is ostensibly a left-wing critique of the sweeping pro-business restructuring carried out by the 1984-1990 Labour Party government of Prime Minister David Lange and Finance Minister Roger Douglas.

In fact, the article underscores the ISO's hostility towards any fight to break the working class from Labour

and the parliamentary establishment. The pseudo-left group promotes the dangerous illusion that Labour, one of the two main parties of big business and imperialism, can be persuaded to return to the policies of social reform that it abandoned four decades ago.

Davies summarises the attacks on the working class by the Labour government in the 1980s, which were expanded by successive National Party and Labour Party governments. These included financial deregulation, the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax and university student fees, "massive spending cuts on social services... personal and corporate tax rate reduction, relaxing of labour laws," and the sale of state-owned assets. The assault produced a major increase in unemployment and drop in living standards, from which the working class has never recovered.

The ISO says all this can be reversed by the Labour Party itself. The article calls on the party to "apologise for the past harm it has caused," and "turn away from sucking up to the business and the bourgeoisie class, put in the hard work, live up to its party name and seriously help the working class for the first time in forty-five years."

The ISO has not attempted to explain why it was so wrong about the Ardern government. In October 2017, after Labour's announcement of its coalition with the right-wing NZ First, the ISO gushed: "Labour has announced plans better than the International Socialists dared hope possible. There are real reforms set up here, and proposals which, if implemented, will bring real benefits to the lives of working people." These claims have been completely discredited by more than two years of worsening social inequality, repeated attacks on immigrants and a closer alliance US imperialism.

Davies now states that the Ardern government "has talked about fairness and wellbeing, but aside from minimal tinkering at the edges of problems, has done very

little.” In fact, it has strengthened the police state and deepened the attacks on workers’ living standards. Davies implores Labour to announce a “bold” policy, such as wiping student debt or increasing welfare benefits to a “livable” level to “show the downtrodden public a sign of hope that the Labour Party can stop renegeing on promises.”

The notion that Labour is willing or capable of making meaningful reforms is a fraud, underpinned by the ISO’s false analysis of the 1980s Labour government. According to the ISO, Labour’s role as the direct instrument of big business was all just a big mistake: cabinet ministers fell under the spell of right-wing Treasury bureaucrats and big business lobbyists and carried out an “economic experiment, with theories never tried, let alone proven anywhere else.”

In fact, by the 1980s the unprecedented global integration of production had completely undermined the social democratic program of suppressing the class struggle by offering concessions within a regulated national-based economy. Labour responded in the same way as Thatcher’s government in Britain and Reagan’s in the US, by removing subsidies and protections and drastically restructuring the economy, in the name of enhancing corporate global competitiveness. The pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy suppressed any resistance from workers.

Contrary to the mythology promoted by the ISO, Labour was never a socialist party; it was founded in 1916 as a reformist party dedicated to preserving capitalism. Its transformation into an openly pro-business, “neo-liberal” party was not just the outcome of subjective choices by bad leaders, but part of an objective international process. Social democratic parties in Australia, Britain, and across Europe all embraced the “free market” and adopted similar right-wing programs in line with the demands of finance capital. All have seen a dramatic collapse in their support in the working class as a result. In New Zealand, masses of people correctly see the Labour Party as no different from the conservative National Party—a development which alarms Labour’s pseudo-left supporters.

The ISO supports Labour not despite but because of its anti-working class and militarist record. The group has nothing to do with socialism, but represents elements of the upper-middle class, including trade union bureaucrats and academics, seeking to improve their positions under capitalism.

For years the ISO has sought to more directly integrate

into bourgeois politics: in 2011 it joined and campaigned for the Maori nationalist Mana Party, a pro-business, anti-immigrant party, which the pseudo-lefts falsely packaged as “left wing” on the basis of racial identity politics. When Mana failed to re-enter parliament in 2014, the ISO exited the party.

The ISO’s politics are essentially the same as those of its now-defunct US parent organisation, which functioned as a “left” apologist for the Democratic Party and US imperialism. Last year a murky MeToo-style sex scandal was used as a pretext to dissolve the ISO (US), enabling many of its leading members to join the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and campaign for the Democrats. The *World Socialist Web Site* exposed how the ISO had been funded largely by foundations linked to the Democrats. The ISO (NZ) has not seen fit to explain its position on these extraordinary developments.

The global capitalist system is in a period of immense economic and political crisis and the resurgence of working-class struggle. The ruling elites and their political parties are responding not with progressive reforms but with threats of war, anti-immigrant poison and authoritarian policies, encouraging the growth of fascism. The alternatives facing the working class are not reform or revolution, but world socialist revolution or fascist barbarism.

Jacinda Ardern’s promises of a capitalist system based on “kindness” and “compassion” are lies, as are the ISO’s claims that Labour can “seriously help the working class.” Whichever capitalist party or parties form government in New Zealand after the 2020 election, they will accelerate the assault on the working class.

Workers, students and young people who want to build a genuine socialist party should study the program and principles of the Socialist Equality Group and the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement. This is the only political organisation that has consistently fought for the political independence of the working class from all bourgeois parties, on the basis of socialism and internationalism.



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