

Late New Zealand PM Mike Moore lauded as a “working-class hero”

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Mike Moore, a leading figure in New Zealand’s 1984–90 Labour government, which initiated the “pro-market” assault on jobs, living standards and the social rights of the working class, died on February 2, aged 71. He had been in poor health since a stroke in 2015 when he was NZ’s ambassador in Washington.

At his public funeral in Auckland on February 14, current Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern praised Moore as a “working-class hero” who had “lived and breathed Labour all his working life.”

In parliament, MPs similarly lauded him as a “true working-class prime minister.” Conservative opposition National Party leader Simon Bridges declared he embodied the tradition of “looking out for Kiwi battlers.” Leader of the right-wing NZ First Party, Winston Peters, claimed Moore “spent every day of his life trying to make things better for New Zealand and New Zealanders.”

Moore’s services to the corporate elite were extolled by *New Zealand Herald* business columnist Fran O’Sullivan, who said Moore, as World Trade Organisation (WTO) head from 1999–2002, had been a “global public servant.”

The glorification of Moore as a “working-class hero” is a fraud. It is provoked by concerns across the political establishment, now entering an election countdown, over the broad popular alienation from both the Labour Party and the entire parliamentary set-up.

Moore earned his plaudits, not because he fought for working people, but because of his pivotal role in defending the interests of big business and New Zealand imperialism. He was ranked third in Labour’s so-called “fish and chip brigade”—the cabinet cabal including Prime Minister David Lange, Finance Minister Roger Douglas and State-Owned Enterprises Minister Richard Prebble that was hailed internationally for its ruthless opening up of one of the world’s most protected and regulated economies to global market forces. Moore held a number

of prominent posts including overseas trade minister and deputy finance minister.

As the working class was subordinated to the sweeping requirements of international finance capital it suffered a social catastrophe. Douglas introduced a goods and services tax, imposed “user pays” policies in health and education, and destroyed over 60,000 jobs. The privatisation of public enterprises saw \$8bn in assets sold. Inequality began to soar—the top 10 percent of earners rapidly increased its share of total income by 4 percent to 20 percent.

However humble Moore’s early life may have been—he grew up in poverty and quit school aged 14—the Labour Party which he joined and championed was never a genuine party of the working class. Founded by the trade union bureaucracy in 1916, it was a pro-imperialist, racist, bourgeois party. At every critical turn, including in the world wars and 1930s’ Depression when mass anger over inequality and war threatened to explode, Labour was brought forward to defend capitalism.

In 1984, with finance capital demanding the liberalising of global markets, Labour came to power to impose the same program as Thatcher in Britain and Reagan in the US. Moore’s role, while acting as the key spokesman for the “free trade” agenda, was to present a “working class” veneer to this onslaught.

During the 1987 election, Labour faced a barely contained rebellion in the working class. Moore was dispatched to defend the party’s record. At a meeting attended by this writer, he flatly denied that workers were being thrust into poverty, cynically remarking; “There are people in this country so poor, they have to put the baby to bed in the box the video player came in.”

Moore was installed as prime minister just weeks before the 1990 general election in a bid, he told Radio NZ in 2017, “to save the furniture”—that is, contain the damage of the likely electoral disaster. He replaced Geoffrey

Palmer who took over after Lange had resigned in the face of massive unrest, and with the party split following the breakaway of NewLabour. Moore was the third prime minister in 13 months, and lasted just 59 days before Labour lost the election in a landslide.

Moore subsequently lost the leadership to Helen Clark, but stayed on for nine years in opposition. In 1999, he secured the position of director-general of the WTO after travelling the world campaigning for the job. Significantly he was backed by then conservative National Party Prime Minister Jenny Shipley, who recently remarked: “Mike managed to transcend the line in political terms in his belief in market economies and won enthusiastic support from the left and the right.”

As WTO head, Moore presided over the Ministerial Conference of 1999, dubbed the “Battle in Seattle.” This was a reference not only to the anti-WTO protest outside the conference hall which was savagely attacked by 1,000 riot police, but to the conflicts taking place inside it.

While the conference’s stated aim was to set the agenda for the “Millenium Round” of trade liberalisation, delegates failed to reach agreement amid deep disagreements with developing countries and over agriculture, competition and investment policy, and the enforcement of so-called “labour standards.” The negotiations collapsed and were reconvened in Doha, Qatar, in 2001, where protests were outlawed. During Moore’s tenure the WTO expanded to include, among others, China.

Richard Prebble, who is still widely reviled in the NZ working class for destroying most of the core public service, and who quit Labour in 1996 to join the far-right ACT Party founded by Douglas, claimed in a tribute to his “lifelong friend” Moore that the latter’s subsequent “third great office” was as NZ ambassador to the US.

Moore was appointed to the role by Clark to continue her government’s rapprochement with Washington. From 1999, Labour restored the ANZUS military alliance after the partial rift caused by NZ’s 1987 anti-nuclear legislation. Labour sent troops to the Bush administration’s illegal invasion of Afghanistan and occupation of Iraq, and joined Australia’s neo-colonial interventions in East Timor and Solomon Islands.

Moore’s ambassadorship was reconfirmed by National after it defeated Labour in the 2008 election. Prebble has described two visits to Washington during which Moore invited “leading conservative thinkers” to the embassy for dinner, including the arch-militarist John Bolton. The current US Ambassador to NZ, Scott Brown, a Trump

appointee, asserted that “the US-NZ friendship is deeper and stronger because of him [Moore].”

Defending the “free trade” agenda in his 1990 book, “Saving Globalisation,” Moore claimed that global capitalism had “produced more wealth in the past 60 years than the rest of history put together,” with hundreds of millions purportedly lifted out of extreme poverty.

In fact, globalisation rendered obsolete the reformist program of national economic regulation on which the Labour Party and the trade unions had for decades rested. Globalised production demanded nothing less than the unfettered operation of the market and with it, the relentless attacks on the social position of the international working class, which have produced staggering levels of social inequality and are still continuing.

Labour unerringly adapted to capitalism’s new “reality.” Arden, while occasionally speaking out against the devastation produced by “Rogernomics” is full of praise for Moore, one of its chief architects. But as Douglas has pointed out, none of the Labourites who latterly criticised him have done anything to roll back his policies. That remains true of the current government.

Amid a re-emergence of the international class struggle, the only alternative for working people is the program that Moore always bitterly opposed: the replacement of global capitalism with a planned world socialist economy that harnesses the immense resources produced by the working class for social need, not profit. Such a program is the only means for ending deepening social inequality, defending democratic rights and preventing war.



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