

New Zealand 2020 election

The fight for social equality, against the pandemic and against war, is the fight for world socialism

The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)

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The October 17 election is being held amid an unprecedented global crisis in which the crucial task confronting the working class in New Zealand is to initiate the fight for an internationalist and socialist perspective aimed at the overthrow of the outmoded and reactionary capitalist system.

Not a single problem confronting working people in New Zealand and around the world—the drive to war, the dangers posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and mass impoverishment—can even begin to be tackled outside the struggle for socialism.

The Socialist Equality Group, the New Zealand supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International, does not support any party in this election. Neither the Labour Party-led government nor any other established party represents a progressive option or a lesser evil. The next government, whoever leads it, will ramp up the assault on the living standards of the working class and strengthen New Zealand's integration into US war preparations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the internal rot and decay of the world capitalist order, accelerating processes long in the making. It has fuelled a further rise in social inequality as the financial elites benefit from trillions of dollars provided to them by governments and the central banks.

It has intensified the drive to war, with potentially catastrophic consequences, as governments around the world, led by the US, step up their anti-China rhetoric and provocations.

The response of governments to the pandemic, prioritising the demands of big business while refusing to deal with it as a health crisis, is fuelling social tensions and opposition. In response, the ruling elites are seeking to direct mass anger outwards as they develop ever more authoritarian forms of rule at home.

The US is at the very centre of the global crisis of capitalism. The Trump administration epitomises a financial aristocracy that has amassed huge wealth at the expense of the working class through speculation and swindling on Wall Street and will stop at nothing to defend its privileges. Trump is threatening to dispense with the trappings of democracy, disregard the November election result and mobilise fascist militias to carry out a coup.

The social and economic devastation is producing a rising tide of social anger and hostility towards the capitalist order. But this alone is far from sufficient. The crucial task is the construction of a new party of the working class fighting to arm the working class with its own political program based on socialism and internationalism. This is the program of the Socialist Equality Group (SEG).

The origins of the Ardern government

The SEG is the only political organisation that has consistently opposed the Labour Party-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern from the standpoint of socialism. We warned, correctly, that the Ardern government would accelerate social inequality, strengthen the alliance with US imperialism as it prepares for war, and promote nationalism and attack the rights of immigrants.

The first step for workers and youth striving to find a way out of the disasters produced by the capitalist crisis is to consciously oppose the nationalist myths promoted by the ruling class and its political parties, especially Labour, that New Zealand is a haven of stability, sheltered from the turmoil ripping through the rest of the world.

The conception of the country as a “team of five million” united behind Ardern has been central to the Labour Party's re-election campaign. The aim is to chloroform New Zealand workers in the face of the crucial political tasks they confront and to separate them from the international working class. The big lie of New Zealand exceptionalism and its tranquil isolation is exposed by the very origins of the Ardern government.

The media portrayal of Ardern as the antithesis to the fascistic US President Donald Trump is false. Ardern has pointedly refused to criticise Trump's racist outbursts and his threat to carry out a coup. Asked during a televised debate whether Trump was “a dangerous influence on the world,” Ardern and National Party leader Judith Collins both refused to answer directly, but stated that they would continue to work with him if he is re-elected.

Ardern's silence is no accident. Her government owes its very existence to the machinations of US imperialism. The right-wing nationalist NZ First Party decided to form a coalition with the Labour Party and the Greens in 2017, instead of the National Party which received more votes, following the direct intervention of Washington.

During the protracted coalition talks following the election, US ambassador Scott Brown publicly criticised the previous National Party government for failing to back Trump's threat to “totally destroy” North Korea. New Zealand is a member of the Five Eyes, the US-led intelligence sharing network, and is seen as a critical ally in the build-up to war against China. Brown made clear that Washington would not tolerate the wavering of the National Party, which had sought to balance NZ's military alliance with the US with stronger economic ties with China.

The nationalist outpourings of NZ First, a party with a long history of attacking Asian immigration, dovetailed with the anti-China orientation of

Labour and its trade union backers. The trade union-funded *Daily Blog* has repeatedly demonised Chinese “influence” and demanded the expulsion of Chinese-born National Party MP Jian Yang from parliament. The blog aligned itself with prominent NATO-funded academic Anne-Marie Brady, who in 2017 accused Yang, without any evidence, of being an agent of the Chinese Communist Party.

Throughout its term of office, the Arden government has tied New Zealand ever more closely into the US war plans. A 2018 defence policy statement directly echoed the Pentagon, labelling China and Russia as the major “threats” facing the global order. The government is committed to spending \$20 billion on upgrading the military by 2030.

NZ First leader Winston Peters, who Arden appointed deputy prime minister and foreign minister, has repeatedly appealed to the US to move more of its military into the Pacific to aggressively confront China. Canberra and Wellington have intervened militarily to advance their own neo-colonial interests throughout the Pacific region, and they view China as an interloper.

Labour is a party of big business and war. In the 1980s, it led the way for social democratic parties throughout the world when, in response to the globalisation of production, it ditched any adherence to social reformist policies and transformed itself into the direct instrument of the financial elite. The 1984–1990 Labour government led by Prime Minister David Lange and Finance Minister Roger Douglas implemented a brutal agenda of pro-business restructuring that paralleled the policies of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the US.

The Lange government began dismantling New Zealand’s protected economy and preparing industries for privatisation. Tens of thousands of workers were made redundant in the railways, forestry, meat-processing and other industries. Fees were introduced for university students and for healthcare services. Taxes for the rich were slashed, while a regressive consumption tax was introduced for the working class. The trade unions played the key role in suppressing workers’ opposition to this agenda, even as thousands of workers abandoned both Labour and the unions in disgust.

The Lange government is glorified, including by many self-proclaimed “left” commentators, based on the nationalist myth that it took a stand against Washington by opposing nuclear weapons and visits by nuclear-capable navy vessels. The anti-nuclear rhetoric, however, was a charade behind which the alliance with the US was strengthened. Lange oversaw the construction of the key Waihopai spy base and the expansion of the Government Communications Security Bureau, which plays a major role in spying throughout the Asia Pacific region as part of the US-led Five Eyes network.

The claim that New Zealand has an “independent” foreign policy guided by “humanitarian” considerations is a lie used by every major party to obscure the reality that NZ is a minor imperialist power. The ruling class relies on US and Australian backing for its continued dominance over Pacific island countries, such as Tonga and Samoa. In return, successive Labour and National Party governments have joined the criminal US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where New Zealand soldiers have been implicated in war crimes.

Labour’s pro-business response to COVID-19

The myth of New Zealand exceptionalism is being shattered by the experience of the pandemic. Despite the fact that New Zealand has experienced just 25 deaths, a second outbreak of the virus in August, following 102 days in which no community transmission was detected, demonstrates that while the pandemic rages internationally, every country

remains at risk.

The pandemic poses the urgent need for a globally-coordinated and well-resourced response, in which no expense is spared to save lives. This is incompatible with capitalism and the division of the world into competing nation states.

The Arden government, like every government around the world, treated the pandemic first and foremost as an economic and not a health problem. The initial lockdown of the country was imposed in late March, not due to the benevolence and wisdom of Arden, but in response to an incipient movement of the working class. As cases began to spread throughout the country, tens of thousands of people signed online petitions, started by doctors and healthcare workers, demanding a lockdown.

Workers remembered the outbreak of measles in Auckland last year—the consequence of the government’s failure to vaccinate enough of the population—which spread to Samoa, where it killed more than 80 people. New Zealand’s public health system is drastically under-resourced following decades in which funding has failed to keep up with the needs of the growing population. It is not equipped to deal with a surge in COVID-19.

The movement for a lockdown emerged outside the control of the trade union bureaucracy. The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) and the teacher unions vocally opposed a lockdown until the day it was announced by Arden.

Even after a lockdown was imposed, workers remained at risk, with many healthcare and aged care workers reporting inadequate personal protective equipment. The government moved to appease big business by lifting restrictions earlier than health experts recommended, and then failed to undertake mass testing. Arden told the media on April 21 that the public health case for an extended lockdown “has to be traded against the huge economic impact,” i.e., the impact on profits.

The real reason Arden is celebrated by the corporate media is the entirely pro-business character of her government’s response. As in every country, the capitalist class is exploiting the pandemic to bring about a dramatic transfer of wealth from workers to the rich.

The Reserve Bank has allocated \$100 billion for quantitative easing, i.e., printing money to purchase government bonds from the banks in order to prop up their profits.

The government’s \$50 billion COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund (CRRF) has delivered business tax concessions and a so-called wage subsidy scheme, falsely promoted as a way to save jobs. In fact, after getting millions from the scheme, major corporations such as The Warehouse, Briscoes, SkyCity casino and Fletcher Building have sacked thousands of workers. The national airline Air New Zealand was bailed out with a \$900 million loan while sacking 4,000 people.

The working class is facing the worst social disaster since the Great Depression. All the promises made by Labour, NZ First and the Greens in 2017 that their government would alleviate social inequality, poverty and homelessness have been proven to be lies.

Even before the pandemic, one in four children lived in poverty, a figure unchanged since 2017. In 2017–2018, official figures show the richest 10 percent held 59 percent of the country’s assets, while the poorest half held just 2 percent.

Now, the situation is much worse. By June, the median income had fallen 7.6 percent from a year ago. Surveys show more than 30 percent of households experienced a loss of income in 2020. The number of people receiving an unemployment benefit soared by 77,000, or 53 percent, between March and the end of August.

Thousands of people have been forced to rely on charity, with demand for food parcels tripling or quadrupling in some areas of the country. The number of food banks in Auckland exploded to 29, from about five prior to the pandemic.

The government’s false promises to resolve the housing crisis have been

starkly exposed. House prices have soared by 27 percent in the past three years and median rents by 12.5 percent, boosting the wealth of property speculators at the expense of working families. At the end of September about 13,000 home owners were in arrears on their mortgage payments and another 28,000 had their payments temporarily deferred due to financial distress. The number of households on the waiting list for public housing has almost quadrupled from 5,844 to nearly 20,000.

The return of the class struggle and the necessity for rank-and-file committees

In New Zealand, as in the United States, Europe, Asia and Latin America, the social crisis is driving workers to the left. This is especially true of young people who are worst-affected by unemployment: the number of 18- to 24-year-olds on the Job Seeker Allowance has increased by more than 80 percent in the past year. More than a third of this age group are not enrolled to vote, reflecting widespread alienation and hostility towards all the parliamentary parties.

Young people have been at the forefront of mass protests against the Ardern government's inaction on climate change, and the protests over police brutality, which erupted in June in solidarity with the US protests triggered by the murder of George Floyd.

New Zealand was part of the unprecedented wave of protests and strikes that erupted on every continent in 2018–2019, characterised by the influential US think tank, the CSIS, as a global “leaderless revolution” driven by anger over social inequality.

For the first time since 1989, tens of thousands of public hospital nurses and other healthcare workers held a nationwide strike in 2018. This was followed by the first-ever joint strike by primary and secondary school-teachers in 2019, and a series of strikes by doctors. The trade unions were forced, against their will, to call the limited strikes, due to the immense anger over low pay and drastically understaffed hospitals and schools, which had been starved of funding for decades.

These strikes, however, were suffocated and betrayed by the union bureaucracy, which echoed the Ardern government's insistence that there was “no money” to immediately address workers' concerns. The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) and the two teacher unions agreed to an effective wage freeze and no significant increase in staffing, which set the benchmark for continued austerity throughout the public sector.

The crisis of underfunding will only worsen after the election. Asked by *Newshub* why the government had refused to lower the price of doctor's visits, despite promising to do so in 2017, Health Minister Chris Hipkins declared that “financial priorities have had to change because of COVID-19.” In other words, during the biggest public health crisis in living memory, the healthcare system is to be starved of funds so that tens of billions of dollars can be funnelled into big business and the banks.

As inequality and poverty continue to soar, more explosive class battles are inevitable. The Socialist Equality Group (SEG), however, warns that these struggles cannot remain “leaderless” or subordinated to the trade union bureaucracy. During the nurses' and teachers' disputes, the SEG intervened and made the case that workers needed to break from the unions and build new organisations: rank-and-file workplace committees controlled by workers themselves.

The case for workplace committees, independent and opposed to the unions, has become even clearer during the pandemic. Such committees have begun to be established among schoolteachers and auto workers in the US, to oppose the ruthless drive by the corporate elite to reopen the schools and factories while the death toll from COVID-19 continues to soar. The trade unions have aligned themselves with the drive for a return

to work before it is safe to do so.

The unions in New Zealand, like their counterparts internationally, do not represent the workers, but the interests of an upper middle-class bureaucracy. They back the profit system and are tied to the Labour Party and big business by thousands of threads. Their role is to police the working class, enforce mass redundancies, wage cuts, and pro-corporate restructuring.

The formation of rank-and-file committees is a first step in the fight to unify workers within New Zealand and internationally against all the capitalist parties and their program of austerity. This must go hand-in-hand with the fight to build a new political party based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

Defend immigrants!

As an essential component of the fight for socialism, the Socialist Equality Group calls on workers to come to the defence of immigrants, who are being viciously scapegoated for the social crisis by the Labour Party-led government and the entire political establishment, including the unions.

Thousands of temporary migrants who have lost their jobs during the pandemic are being barred from accessing welfare payments and forced to survive on food parcels and other emergency relief. Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters has declared that New Zealand cannot support jobless migrants and they should “go home,” which in many cases means returning to countries where COVID-19 is out of control. Tens of thousands of people who have applied for residency are facing endless delays in the processing of their applications and many fear being forced to leave the country.

The union-backed *Daily Blog* echoes NZ First's demand for a major cut to immigration, based on a phony concern about the “exploitation” of migrant workers. The blog advances a nationalist program to turn New Zealand into a “fortress” against immigrants, including a “large scale increase” in spending on the armed forces. It also advocates stripping recent immigrants of voting rights by restricting the franchise to citizens only.

Workers must reject this nationalist poison, whose aim is to divide the working class—one quarter of whom were born overseas—and prevent any unified struggle against capitalism. The SEG is the only political tendency that fights for equal rights for all workers, regardless of where they were born.

The Christchurch massacre and the danger of fascism

The SEG warns workers that New Zealand is in no way isolated from the promotion of extreme right-wing tendencies by the ruling class throughout the world in response to the resurgence of the working class. This fact was demonstrated by the terrorist attack carried out by fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant on March 15, 2019, which killed 51 men, women and children at two mosques in Christchurch and injured nearly 50 more.

There are many unanswered questions about how the attack was prepared and why the gunman was not stopped, despite his links to fascist groups internationally, and his many online threats of violence. It is clear that Tarrant could only carry out his massacre because, at the very least, the police and intelligence agencies in Australia and New Zealand turned a blind eye to the threat of neo-Nazi violence.

The Ardern government has sought to stifle any discussion of the political roots of the atrocity in the lead-up to the election. The state has banned Tarrant's manifesto and, after the gunman was sentenced to life in prison in August, Ardern declared she did not want to talk about him ever again. The ongoing royal commission of inquiry, supposedly investigating how the attack took place, has been held entirely in secret.

These measures are aimed at stopping workers from grasping the striking similarity between Tarrant's ravings and the racist and anti-immigrant policies of governments throughout the world, including New Zealand. Tarrant idolised US President Donald Trump, who has promoted fascist forces in the US and is relying on them to ensure he remains in office.

Deputy Prime Minister Peters, along with much of the media, sought to dismiss Tarrant as an Australian interloper whose actions do not reflect anything about NZ society. In reality, NZ First has repeatedly attacked Muslims and other immigrants in language very similar to that of the Christchurch shooter.

The strengthening of the police state

The main response of the Ardern government to the Christchurch terror attack has been to use it as a pretext for further strengthening the repressive forces of the state.

The SEG warns that these expanded powers have nothing to do with stopping fascism. They will be used to suppress working-class opposition to militarism and inequality, as was the case in World War I, World War II, the Great Depression and the 1951 waterfront dispute.

Already, as part of its coalition deal with NZ First, Labour agreed to recruit an extra 1,800 frontline police officers, an increase of about 20 percent. The police commissioner seized on the Christchurch massacre to carry out a six-month trial of routinely arming police with guns in Christchurch, South Auckland and the Waikato region.

Fundamental legal protections, including the presumption of innocence and the right to privacy, are under attack. New "anti-terror" legislation introduced last year gives the state the power to impose surveillance and restrictions on movement and internet access on anyone based solely on allegations of "terrorist" activity, without any testing of evidence in a trial. The Ardern government has also joined its partners in the US-led Five Eyes in demanding that tech companies allow the state greater access to encrypted messages.

Ardern has personally led the Christchurch Call to Action, an initiative involving several governments, including France and Australia, and technology giants such as Facebook and Google, to create a global framework for censorship of any online content deemed to be "extremist." The resources of the NZ Censor's Office are being doubled and it is being empowered to rapidly "take down" social media posts and other content.

The hostility of the Ardern government and its allies, including the Greens, to basic democratic rights is perhaps most starkly revealed in their support for the imprisonment and torture of Julian Assange. Washington is seeking to extradite the WikiLeaks founder from the UK and to imprison him for life, or worse, for his role in revealing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, in which New Zealand is also complicit.

The role of the Greens and the pseudo-left

For the past three years, Labour has relied on the Green Party and

pseudo-left groups and commentators to dress up the government as "left wing" or progressive.

This milieu includes the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), Socialist Aotearoa (SA) and Organise Aotearoa, and Unite and other unions. Like their counterparts internationally, such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece, the NZ pseudo-left groups have nothing in common with socialism and internationalism. They represent sections of the upper-middle class that aim to advance their own position under capitalism, within the political establishment, the unions, academia and the state.

Some figures prominent within the pseudo-left were active in the Alliance Party, which entered parliament in a coalition with the Labour Party government in 1999. The party collapsed ignominiously after its MPs supported the government's decision to send SAS troops to join the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

More recently, in 2011 the ISO, SA and former Alliance members entered into the Maori nationalist Mana Party, representing sections of the indigenous bourgeoisie and upper-middle class. It combined racial identity politics with nationalism and anti-immigrant xenophobia. The party collapsed after its leader Hone Harawira contested the 2017 election by scapegoating Chinese people for the drugs trade and calling for dealers to be "executed."

The ISO, as it did in 2017, advocates a Labour vote based on the false claim that it is "reformist" and has "delivered on some" of its promises. This refers to meagre welfare increases which have already been outstripped by the cost of living. Its statement simply ignores the vast increase in social inequality and poverty, the further integration of NZ into the US military build-up, and the international dangers of war and dictatorship.

The pseudo-lefts also promote the Green Party, which is presenting itself as a "left" alternative. It proposes an extremely modest wealth tax (2 per cent for assets over \$2 million) and increased welfare benefits. These policies, which would not stop rising social inequality, have been flatly ruled out by the Labour Party.

In the face of catastrophic climate change the Greens, like their counterparts in Europe, the US and Australia, promote the fantasy of a solution within capitalism. The party vehemently rejects the only means to address the crisis: the expropriation of the major polluting corporations and the establishment of a planned socialist economy on a world scale.

The Greens, which supported the deployment of troops to Afghanistan under previous governments, have sought to justify the Ardern government's military spending on the fraudulent pretext that the new navy vessels and warplanes will be used for "humanitarian" purposes.

The pseudo-lefts all support the Green Party-led campaign for a "yes" vote in the referendum on cannabis legalisation. This non-binding referendum is being put forward primarily as a diversion from the major issues confronting the working class, and as a means to encourage youth to turn out to the polls. The SEG opposes the proposed law, which aims to enrich cannabis producers by expanding the supply of the drug and the harm it causes to young people.

Build the Socialist Equality Group!

Whoever wins Saturday's election, the crisis facing workers and young people will continue to intensify. The only future offered by capitalism is soaring social inequality, war and dictatorship, in addition to the catastrophic spread of COVID-19 and climate change.

These processes have already led to a resurgence of the class struggle internationally, which will inevitably deepen and take on a more explicit

anti-capitalist character. The history of the twentieth century, however, demonstrates that even the most determined struggles will result in disastrous defeats if they do not acquire a conscious, socialist and internationalist political leadership and perspective.

Such a political leadership must urgently be built, independent of all the capitalist parties. This task cannot be postponed. That is also the critical lesson that workers and young people in New Zealand must draw from decades of bitter experience with the Labour Party and its apologists.

The perspective of world socialist revolution is not a utopian aim; it represents the only practical solution to the disaster created by capitalism. Society must be completely reorganised to meet human needs, through the establishment of a workers' government. The banks and major industries must be nationalised, converted into public utilities and placed under democratic control. The billions of dollars funnelled to the military and corporations must be recouped and used to provide healthcare, education, housing and other essential services.

Such a transformation cannot be achieved without the fight for the international unity of the working class. To defeat transnational corporations and to put an end to war, workers must unite across borders. This requires a political struggle against every form of nationalism, which is promoted by the unions and pseudo-lefts to subordinate workers to the bourgeoisie of "their" country.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), world Trotskyist movement, is the only party that is fighting to build the necessary revolutionary leadership in the international working class to abolish capitalism. It publishes the *World Socialist Web Site* and is based on the strategic lessons of the Russian Revolution and all the revolutionary struggles of the past century. It has consistently fought against Stalinism, Maoism and every other nationalist and opportunist tendency responsible for betraying the historic interests of the working class.

The Socialist Equality Group is engaged in educating and mobilising the working class in New Zealand based on these principles and lessons and establishing a section of the ICFI here. Workers and youth looking for a means of fighting for a socialist future against the depredations of capitalism should apply to join the SEG and build it as the revolutionary party for the struggles ahead. We urge readers who agree with this statement to contact us today.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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