

Ahead of New Zealand election, PM Jacinda Ardern lies about reducing poverty

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New Zealand Labour Party leader and incumbent Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern participated in a final televised debate on Thursday against opposition National Party leader Judith Collins, ahead of tomorrow's election.

The debate, like the entire election campaign, underscored the lack of meaningful differences between these two parties of militarism and big business. Neither has put forward any significant election policies. Radio NZ's Kathryn Ryan commented on Monday, "I don't think I have ever seen a campaign so void of substantive policy debate and discussion."

This is because the entire political establishment is conspiring to hide the real agenda of the ruling elite from the working class. The election takes place in the context of an unprecedented global economic crisis triggered by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The next government, whoever leads it, will be tasked with ramping up the assault on workers' living standards, enforcing mass redundancies and wage cuts, while further integrating New Zealand into US war plans against China. To suppress opposition, the police and intelligence agencies, and the powers of the state censor, will continue to be strengthened.

There has been zero discussion by the established parties, including in the four televised debates between Ardern and Collins, about the danger of world war and the threat of dictatorship and fascism in the United States, New Zealand's military and intelligence ally.

When the two leaders were asked in one debate for their views on Donald Trump, Collins praised him and Ardern pledged to continue to work with him if he is elected—remaining silent on Trump's threat to stay in office regardless of the US election outcome. After Trump got infected with COVID-19, as a result of his administration's homicidal "herd immunity" policy that has killed more than 200,000 people, Ardern extended to him "New Zealand's best wishes for a speedy recovery."

Neither candidate or any other politician in the election campaign commented on the Trump-inspired plan of fascist forces to kidnap and execute the Democratic governors of Michigan and other states as a means to enable his theft of the election.

Ardern's government was formed in 2017 with support from the Trump administration, which opposed the previous National Party government's reluctance to fully align with the build-up to war against North Korea and China. The viciously anti-Asian NZ First Party, which was in the position of choosing who would govern despite only receiving seven percent of the votes, decided to form a coalition with the Labour Party, which shared its overtly anti-Chinese stance, supported by the Greens.

While New Zealand, with 25 deaths, has so far escaped the worst effects of the coronavirus, the working class is experiencing the sharpest social crisis in the post-World War II period after the collapse of the tourism industry, and mass job losses in retail, manufacturing and other sectors.

In last night's debate and subsequent interviews Ardern asserted, in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that her government had fulfilled its promise to reduce child poverty and just needed more time to finish the job.

The most recent official figures, from 2019, show a statistically negligible reduction of about 2 percent in the number of children in households below the poverty line of 50 percent of the median income. After housing costs are accounted for, almost one in four children continue to live in poverty. As Collins pointed out, the number of children living in "material hardship," meaning the poorest of the poor, actually increased between 2018 and 2019 by 4,100, from 13.26 to 13.42 percent.

The government's pro-business response to the present crisis has made the situation far worse.

The Ardern government, with the full support of its

coalition partners, the Green Party and NZ First, and the opposition National and Act Parties, has prioritised the interests of the financial elite. It has handed out tens of billions of dollars in bailouts, loans, subsidies and tax concessions to major corporations. The Reserve Bank's quantitative easing operation is propping up the profits of the banks by printing up to \$100 billion to buy back government bonds.

The same corporations that have been bailed out have carried out mass redundancies, with the collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy which has suppressed any resistance in the working class.

By June, median incomes had fallen by 7.6 percent from last year—the first decline ever recorded. Figures released today show the number of people on the Jobseeker (unemployment) benefit has risen by 61,000 people or 43 percent in the past year. Almost 12 percent of the working age population is on welfare. More redundancies are looming as 95,000 people are in jobs supported by the government's temporary wage subsidy scheme.

In one of the few heated exchanges in last night's debate, Collins warned that a Labour-Greens coalition would implement the Green Party's proposed "wealth tax." This extremely modest policy, part of the Greens' attempt to posture as a "left" alternative, would tax assets worth over \$1 million at just 1 percent, and assets over \$2 million at 2 percent.

Ardern denounced Collins for running "a blatant campaign of misinformation," and stated that she would never introduce such a tax, which in any case would not meaningfully reduce inequality. The Greens, for their part, say the policy is not a "bottom line," meaning it will be abandoned in any coalition deal with Labour.

Ardern and Collins both refused to commit to any policies to bring down the cost of housing, which is a major source of wealth for speculators. In the past three years, house prices have risen by more than a quarter and homelessness is deeply entrenched. Ardern's promise in 2017 to address the housing crisis by building thousands of affordable houses proved to be another fraud. The number of people on the public housing waiting list has nearly quadrupled to 20,000.

Based on the polls, the Labour Party is widely expected to be re-elected either with an absolute majority, or with just under 50 percent of the votes, in which case it will need to form a coalition, most likely with the Green Party (polling between 6 and 8 percent). NZ First, which has made numerous racist anti-immigrant statements resembling the words of Christchurch terrorist Brenton

Tarrant, is deeply unpopular with only 2 percent support and is unlikely to return to parliament.

This does not indicate any let-up in the shift to the right by the political establishment. Labour and National have essentially adopted NZ First's anti-immigrant policies. Both Ardern and Collins indicated that they want to see a reduction in immigration once the borders are reopened, while refusing to give a specific number. The Ardern government is seeking to scapegoat migrants for the social crisis and has refused to give welfare payments to non-residents made redundant.

The National Party polled at just 31 percent in TVNZ's poll last night. The party is in turmoil with two leadership changes in recent months and several prominent members announcing their retirement after the election. Some of National's support appears to have gone to the far-right Act Party, which has benefited from positive media coverage and polled about the same as the Greens.

In opposition to the pseudo-left groups, which falsely portray a Labour-Greens government as "reformist" or progressive, the Socialist Equality Group warns that the next government, whichever party leads it, will continue the pro-capitalist onslaught. The policies of the Ardern government have already provoked mass nationwide strikes by nurses, doctors and teachers in 2018 and 2019, which were strangled and betrayed by the unions. The deepening austerity, however, will bring even broader layers of workers into conflict with the government and big business.

We urge those workers and young people looking for a real alternative to mass impoverishment and militarism to read our election statement, watch our recent webinar, and join the fight to build the Socialist Equality Group as the New Zealand section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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