

Labour Party strengthens its hold on power in New Zealand election

Tom Peters**18 October 2020**

The New Zealand Labour Party, led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, was re-elected to a second term in Saturday's election, with 49.1 percent of the votes, up from 36.9 percent in the 2017 election.

Some special votes are yet to be counted (overseas ballots and those cast by late registrants), but Labour is expected to get 64 seats in the 120-seat parliament. This is Labour's best result since 1946 and the first time a party has been able to govern alone since 1996. Labour's ally the Green Party also increased its share of votes from 6.3 to 7.6 percent (10 seats).

The opposition National Party's vote plummeted from 44 percent in 2017 to 27 percent, just 35 seats, its second-worst defeat ever.

Under New Zealand's mixed member proportional (MMP) system, voters have a party vote and a candidate vote. The party vote decides the overall proportion of seats in parliament held by each party, while the candidate vote decides which MP represents an individual electorate.

Labour candidates increased their majorities in several working class electorates, including Mana, north of Wellington, Manurewa in South Auckland and Christchurch East. However, the party's surge in support largely came from sections of the middle class, including farmers and business owners. In the South Island, Labour won the party vote for every single electorate, with only a few seats being retained by individual National MPs.

National lost 15 electorates to Labour, including affluent seats like Northcote and Upper Harbour in Auckland. National Party deputy leader Gerry Brownlee lost his seat of Ilam in Christchurch.

Ardern and Labour benefited from overwhelmingly positive coverage in the global and local media of their response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the absence of any coherent and stable alternative from National. Labour ran an extraordinarily empty campaign. It refused to make any substantive policy announcements and framed the election as a referendum on its handling of the pandemic. This was to give itself a free hand to continue to impose its right-wing agenda after the election.

New Zealand imposed a relatively strict lockdown in March before the country's first recorded death from the virus (there have been 25 deaths in total). The reality, however, is that the

Ardern government was forced to lock down due to mass pressure from workers, including online petitions organised by doctors independently of the trade unions.

For all the media hoopla about Labour's "historic" victory, large numbers of workers view Labour and National, correctly, as two parties of big business and militarism with essentially the same politics. Turnout was slightly higher than in 2017, but the Electoral Commission's preliminary figures indicate that almost one in four eligible people, 877,674, decided not to vote for any party.

Ardern's acceptance speech recalled US Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden's right-wing appeal to Republican voters. Addressing traditional National Party voters who had switched to Labour, Ardern declared that she would listen to their point of view. Labour, Ardern said, "will be a party that governs for every New Zealander."

She vaguely declared that Labour would "take on poverty and inequality" and create "thousands of jobs, new state homes to house the homeless," renewable electricity and support for "small businesses." One only has to look at the record of the last Ardern Labour government to know that these promises are lies.

In fact, the Ardern government's main response to the economic crisis triggered by COVID-19 has been the same as other governments internationally: an unprecedented handout of tens of billions of dollars to businesses, which have sacked tens of thousands of workers. Living standards are plummeting, with the median income falling by 7.6 percent in the past year. Almost one in four children live in poverty, 20,000 families are on the public housing waiting list and nearly 12 percent of working age people are on welfare.

The Labour-led government was confronted in 2018–2019 with nationwide strikes by nurses and teachers. These stoppages, the largest in 30 years, were betrayed by the union bureaucracy, which pushed through the government's agenda by signing agreements that maintained low wages and staffing levels.

Any illusions that Labour is a progressive party, or a "lesser evil" to National, will be shattered by the assault on the working class that is already well underway. To repay the debt accumulated by bailing out the rich, the re-elected Ardern

government will work with big business and the union bureaucracy to implement drastic austerity measures.

This will inevitably trigger a resurgence of class struggle. The fact that Labour is even considering a coalition with the Greens points to its nervousness about governing alone in these circumstances.

The government will also continue to strengthen military spending and ties with the US.

Although Ardern is still falsely described in the international media as the “anti-Trump,” her coalition government formed in 2017 was supported by the Trump administration, which publicly criticised the previous National government’s strong orientation towards building business and trade ties with China.

In 2017, Labour scraped into power thanks to the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party’s decision to form a coalition with Labour and the Greens instead of the National Party, which received more votes. Ardern rewarded NZ First, which only got 7.2 percent of the votes, with the positions of deputy prime minister, foreign affairs minister and defence minister. Labour and NZ First had for years demonised Chinese immigrants and, over the past three years, strengthened New Zealand’s integration into US war preparations against China.

Labour’s victory is largely due to the unending turmoil in the National Party, including two leadership changes in the months leading up to the election. Current leader, Judith Collins, was only installed three months ago. The party has been attacked in the media for its links with Chinese donors. Pro-US academic Anne-Marie Brady, who is heavily promoted by the nationalist, trade union backed *Daily Blog*, repeatedly denounced National Party MP Jian Yang, without any evidence, as an “agent” of the Chinese Communist Party. Yang is one of several National MPs now retiring from politics.

NZ First, an openly racist party widely despised in the working class, received just 2.7 percent of the votes in this election—well below the 5 percent threshold needed to enter parliament. Following the mass murder of 51 Muslim worshippers in Christchurch on March 15, 2019 by fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant, NZ First ramped up its anti-immigrant scapegoating. NZ First leader and foreign minister Winston Peters responded to the pandemic by telling immigrants who lost their jobs to “go home.”

The Labour government, however, has adopted NZ First’s anti-immigrant policies. Ardern has refused to extend unemployment benefits to non-residents who have lost their jobs. The government is deliberately delaying the processing of tens of thousands of residency applications for families living in NZ, many of whom fear being forced to leave the country.

The Greens postured as a “left” alternative but the party’s campaign largely focused on better-off electorates. Its MP Chlöe Swarbrick narrowly won Auckland Central, an upper middle class electorate previously held by National. Swarbrick also led the Greens’ campaign for a “yes” vote in the cannabis legalisation referendum, which served as a major diversion

from issues of social inequality and war, and a ploy to get out the vote, particularly among middle class people. The results of two non-binding referenda on cannabis and euthanasia will not be made public until the end of the month.

A significant feature of the election was the media’s promotion of other extreme right parties, particularly the ACT Party, at the expense of National and NZ First. ACT received 8 percent of the votes (10 seats), a substantial increase from 0.5 percent in the last election. Its overt aim is the destruction of public services and welfare. The party was strongly backed by the firearms lobby and campaigned against restrictions on guns following the Christchurch terrorist attack.

The Maori Party, a right-wing party based on racial identity politics and anti-immigrant chauvinism, exploited the worsening social conditions among Maori to narrowly win the Waiariki electorate from Labour. The Maori Party was part of the 2008–2017 National Party government and supported its austerity measures in response to the 2008 financial crisis.

The Christian fundamentalist New Conservatives received 1.5 percent and Advance NZ, which was established this year, got 0.9 percent (20,000 votes)—not enough to enter parliament. Advance NZ held widely publicised anti-lockdown rallies and promoted pseudoscience about COVID-19. It is viciously anti-Chinese and its co-leader Jami-Lee Ross, who defected from the National Party in 2018, was recently interviewed by Trump’s former advisor Steve Bannon on one of the latter’s anti-Chinese internet broadcasts.

The election result is being hailed by Labour’s supporters in the liberal and pseudo-left milieu, such as the *Daily Blog*, the unions and middle-class groups like the International Socialist Organisation and Socialist Aotearoa. The latter declared on Facebook, “there is more potential for workers and the left to push this government into making decent reforms in the short-term than there would ever have been with the Tories.”

Council of Trade Unions President Richard Wagstaff declared that the government “has been given an overwhelming mandate to end poverty and inequality in New Zealand.”

Workers and young people must not be deceived by such statements. The Ardern government is presiding over the most brutal assault on the working class since the Great Depression. This onslaught, including mass redundancies enforced by the unions, will only intensify. Those seeking a real alternative must turn to the genuine socialist and internationalist program fought for by the Socialist Equality Group and the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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