

Jacobin hails New Zealand Labour government's re-election

Tom Peters

25 October 2020

The election victory of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party in New Zealand has been glorified by *Jacobin* magazine, the pseudo-left publication linked with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a faction of the Democratic Party.

An article titled "Jacinda-Mania Isn't Enough for New Zealand's Workers, Māori, or the Environment," by Ben Peterson, an official in New Zealand's FIRST Union, declares Labour's victory "a win for the whole political left, one replete with possibilities for further victories." The government, Peterson says, can be pressured to make "radical change" to improve workers' lives.

Notwithstanding some left-sounding phrases and a few mild criticisms, the article basically echoes publications like the *New York Times* and the *Nation*, which have hailed the Ardern government as "progressive" and "inclusive." Although Peterson doesn't mention the upcoming US election, Ardern is being widely presented as a model for the Democrats' presidential contender Joe Biden, whose right-wing and pro-war campaign is supported by the DSA and *Jacobin*.

With the capitalist system in its worst crisis since the Great Depression, triggered by the coronavirus pandemic, *Jacobin* holds up New Zealand as supposed evidence that capitalist governments can still make progressive reforms. Among the Democrats and their supporters, New Zealand seems to have replaced Sweden as the go-to example of a "democratic socialist" country. Sweden can no longer serve this purpose since its government pioneered the "herd immunity" policy of allowing the coronavirus to spread. This has been adopted by the ruling class throughout the world, leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths.

To present the Ardern government as a left-wing alternative, however, is a complete falsification of its record since 2017.

Peterson praises Ardern's response to the pandemic, including a relatively strict lockdown, but without mentioning that it was only implemented in response to mass pressure from the working class, including health care

workers and teachers. Online petitions demanding a lockdown attracted tens of thousands of signatures, raising the spectre of a workers' movement developing independently of the unions, which opposed a lockdown until the government finally imposed it.

The article also glorifies Ardern's economic response, claiming that "a wage subsidy scheme and other forms of stimulus [kept] unemployment much lower than originally projected."

In fact, the Labour Party-led government is presiding over the biggest assault on the working class in generations. In just a few months, unemployment has skyrocketed from about 4 percent to a real rate well above 10 percent. And it is likely to go higher, with predictions that New Zealand could suffer a second recession next year. The median income has plummeted by 7.6 percent this year, the first such drop ever recorded.

The government's stimulus package, as in every other country, provided tens of billions of dollars to big business, while the Reserve Bank is printing up to \$100 billion to buy bonds from the banks and prop up their profits. Financial and business circles have welcomed Labour's election victory, seeing it as more stable than the rival National Party and better able to impose the drastic austerity measures that will be required to repay the debt accumulated by bailing out the rich.

Major companies that received millions in so-called wage subsidies, tax concessions and other handouts from the government have made thousands of workers redundant. The unions have played a crucial role, working with employers and the government to prevent any organised movement against job cuts and pro-business restructuring.

Peterson's FIRST Union, for instance, recently told workers facing redundancy at The Warehouse retail chain that they could not go on strike, and instead issued fruitless appeals to the company to reconsider its plan to sack as many as 1,080 people. The union then encouraged workers to re-elect the government that had given The Warehouse \$67.8 million in wage subsidies.

Peterson falsely claims that workers have won significant gains in the past three years. He states that following the nationwide nurses' strike in 2018, the government "dramatically improved nurses' pay and added hundreds more staff to wards." The strike, part of an upsurge of working class struggles in New Zealand and internationally, was strangled by the union bureaucracy. The New Zealand Nurses Organisation forced through an extremely unpopular deal that included no significant staffing increase and a pay rise of just 3 percent, effectively freezing wages relative to the cost of living.

The ruling elites are clearly anticipating a further upsurge of class struggle, which the Labour Party government and the unions will be tasked with suppressing. Already the new government is showing signs of nervousness about what it will have to impose. Despite Labour's overall majority allowing it to govern alone, the party is engaged in a fortnight of talks to arrive at some sort of deal with the Green Party. Labour, apparently, feels that it may need the Greens to project a bogus "progressive" image as the government rolls out its right-wing agenda.

Significantly, *Jacobin* does not mention that New Zealand is a US ally or that Ardern has strengthened ties with the Trump administration. Her government labelled China and Russia the main "threats" to the international order and is spending tens of billions to upgrade and expand the military to integrate into US war plans.

In 2017, Labour came to power only thanks to a coalition deal, supported publicly by the US ambassador, with the New Zealand First Party, a racist party that has repeatedly demonised Muslims and Chinese and Indian immigrants. The Ardern government imposed class-based restrictions on immigration and attacked migrants during the pandemic, including by refusing to extend unemployment benefits to thousands who lost their jobs.

Jacobin regurgitates the media's glorification of Ardern's response to the March 2019 massacre of 51 Muslims by fascist terrorist Brenton Tarrant. According to Peterson, Ardern showed "genuine concern" for the victims and her "response stood as an important rejection of racism and xenophobic politics," even though the anti-immigrant filth espoused by Tarrant was very similar to that of Ardern's ally—New Zealand First.

Peterson falsely describes New Zealand First as a "center-right populist" party, and does not mention its racist positions or anti-immigrant policies, which Labour adopted. This is not accidental: the trade unions in New Zealand, as in the United States, are steeped in nationalism and xenophobia. FIRST Union, while feigning concern about migrant worker exploitation, has repeatedly scapegoated migrants for driving down wages and taking jobs "that New

Zealanders should be doing."

The circumstances surrounding the Christchurch terrorist attack have been deliberately shrouded in secrecy, with a Royal Commission of Inquiry taking place entirely behind closed doors. But it is clear that the attack could only have happened because police and intelligence agencies in Australia and New Zealand ignored repeated threats of violence by fascist groups and by Tarrant himself.

The Ardern government's main response to the massacre, which *Jacobin* endorses, has been to introduce greater powers for the state to censor "extremist" content on social media—powers that inevitably will be used against left-wing groups and workers.

Jacobin's positions on the Christchurch massacre are in line with its efforts to downplay the danger of fascist violence in the United States, including the Trump-inspired plot to kidnap and kill the governor of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer. The magazine aims to sow complacency in order to subordinate workers and youth to big business political parties whose policies create the conditions for the growth of the extreme right: Labour in New Zealand and the Democrats in the US.

The jubilant response of the pseudo-left internationally to Ardern's re-election exposes the gulf separating them from genuine socialism and internationalism. These groups represent sections of the middle class, including the trade union bureaucracy, which aim to improve their positions within capitalism at the expense of workers.

The Ardern government is promising to elevate the unions' role as an industrial police force through a corporatist wage-setting mechanism misleadingly called Fair Pay Agreements. Peterson hails this policy, without mentioning that its purpose is to ban strikes during industry-wide pay negotiations involving the unions, the employers and the state.

Workers and young people internationally must not be deceived by the promotion by the pseudo-lefts of the New Zealand Labour Party and the Greens. Ardern will form a right-wing government that will inevitably come into conflict with the working class, which will seek to fight back against the historic assault on its living standards and against the threat of war and the far-right. Exposing the lies of *Jacobin* and similar publications is essential in order to build the necessary socialist leadership in preparation for the revolutionary struggles ahead.



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