Socialist Equality Group webinar discusses New Zealand and US elections

Our reporter
12 November 2020

The Socialist Equality Group (SEG), the New Zealand supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International, held a public webinar on November 8 entitled "For a socialist program against the New Zealand Labour government's right-wing agenda." The meeting debunked the propaganda presenting Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government as compassionate and progressive, and highlighted New Zealand's growing integration into US war plans.

The chair, SEG member Matthew Carrington, began by pointing out that the meeting was being held during an historic crisis of democracy in the United States. Earlier in the day Joe Biden had finally declared victory in the US presidential election four days earlier. Sitting president Donald Trump is refusing to concede and has made unfounded claims that he lost due to "voter fraud."

Cheryl Crisp, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) stressed that, contrary to the claims being made by *Jacobin* and other pseudo-left organisations, the Democrats did not represent a lesser evil. Biden was preparing "a form of national unity administration" with the direct involvement of the Republicans. Crisp pointed to angry outbursts by prominent Democrats against socialism, making clear the party's vicious hostility to any policy to address social inequality.

Crisp explained that the Democrats were downplaying Trump's threats of a coup and his encouragement of fascist militias, because "they fear far more the movement of workers and young people than they do a Trump fascist coup."

Both parties "approach the pandemic from the standpoint not of saving lives but saving profits," Crisp said. The Democrats supported the Trump administration's multi-trillion dollar bailouts of big business—its main response to the pandemic—while rejecting serious measures to stop the spread of coronavirus. Nearly a quarter of a million people in the US alone have died of COVID-19 and poverty and inequality are soaring as a result of these bipartisan policies.

SEG member John Braddock explained that, contrary to Ardern's description of New Zealand as a "calm oasis in a chaotic and difficult world," the country is not isolated from the worsening global economic, social and geopolitical crisis. In the past three years the Ardern government has increasingly integrated New Zealand into the US build-up to war against China.

The Trump administration publicly intervened after the 2017 NZ election, through its ambassador, to support the formation of a Labour Party-led coalition that included the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party. Washington preferred a Labour-NZ First government because both parties had opposed the former National Party-led government's strengthening of business ties with China.

Braddock pointed to the Ardern government's recent moves to redeploy the air force to Japan, as part of the US-led military encirclement of China and North Korea, and Ardern's praise for increased US coast guard vessels in the Pacific region. "This discussion about the ramped-up US presence in the Pacific took place entirely behind the backs of the population during the election campaign," Braddock said.

The SEG's Tom Peters outlined the Ardern government's pro-business response to the pandemic, which mirrored that of the US and other governments. Tens of billions of dollars has been handed to big business and the banks, "creating enormous debt that will be recouped through austerity and savage pro-

© World Socialist Web Site

business restructuring."

Peters refuted claims by Jacobin and the International Socialist Organisation that Labour's re-election was a "win for the left." "These tendencies write as though the Ardern government's attacks on the working class over the last three years never happened and they pretend that things have improved," he said.

The speaker gave figures on growing poverty, including plummeting incomes, mounting unemployment, increased demand for charities, soaring house prices and rents, and deeply entrenched rates of homelessness.

Peters noted that workers had sought to fight back against the Ardern government's austerity policies, with nationwide strikes in 2018–2019 by teachers and nurses, but these historic actions were betrayed. "In New Zealand, as in every other country," he said, "the chief obstacle was the union bureaucracy, which worked with the assistance of the pseudo-lefts to subordinate the working class to the Labour Party's capitalist agenda." Wages for healthcare workers and teachers, and staffing in hospitals and schools, remained effectively frozen.

New eruptions of revolutionary class struggle were inevitable, Peters said, but workers had to prepare by making a conscious political break from the corporatised trade unions, the Labour Party, the Greens and their supporters. The necessary political leadership, based on socialism and internationalism, had to be built. "That is why joining our party is the most urgent political task facing those in this meeting who agree with our analysis," Peters concluded.

The reports provoked several questions from the audience, including on the SEG's support for lockdowns in response to the pandemic, and on the difference between Marxism and the reformist proposals such as those of economist Joseph Stiglitz. In response to the latter question, WSWS writer Nick Beams explained the bankruptcy of Stiglitz's appeals for the ruling class to change its mind-set and adopt a gentler form of capitalism. The alternatives facing workers were not reform or revolution, but revolution or counter-revolution, he said (see also: The fraud of "progressive capitalism").

In response to another question, Braddock explained the SEG's opposition to two referenda on euthanasia and cannabis legalisation. Socialists could not support euthanasia while the health system, the care of the elderly is dominated by the demands of profit, he said. Euthanasia is being promoted while governments around the world are leaving elderly people to die from COVID-19, and right-wing commentators argue that they are too costly to keep alive.

Braddock said cannabis legalisation was falsely promoted, particularly by the Greens, as a progressive measure to stop young people being victimised by the police. In fact, its purpose was to make the drug more widely available to distract working class youth from a political struggle against capitalism. Crisp added that socialists opposed the criminalisation of people who used drugs, but did not support legalisation. "Our fight is to raise the level of consciousness, the level of awareness, amongst young people and the working class; the role of cannabis, the role of drugs and alcohol, is to deaden that," she said.

Another audience member asked about the SEG position on the government's anti-immigrant measures. New Zealand's draconian border restrictions meant he had been separated from his partner, who is stuck overseas, for more than a year. Meanwhile, "film crews, billionaires" and other privileged people were allowed into the country.

Peters stated that the Labour Party shared the anti-immigrant positions of NZ First, and had scapegoated migrants for the social crisis. The SEG called for "the working class in New Zealand to defend the rights of immigrants," who made up a large portion of the population. The strategy of the ruling class was to divide immigrants from other workers in order to prevent any fightback against austerity, militarism and attacks on democratic rights.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site