

New Zealand pseudo-lefts cover their tracks over Afghan war

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The historic debacle of the US and its allies in Afghanistan has sharply exposed the predatory nature of the imperialist war, and demolished the fabrications used by all the political parties and individuals that promoted it.

The invasion was a criminal action, a war of conquest aimed at securing US domination over a strategically important area in Central Asia. The US imposed a regime in Kabul through a 20-year military occupation, initiated on the basis of lies about fighting “terrorism” and maintained through endless war crimes, including the use of assassination and torture. The human and social costs were catastrophic. It was followed by the invasion of Iraq, which killed over a million more people and fuelled the rise of Islamic State.

The New Zealand ruling elite was among the first to respond to Washington’s demand for international support. The Labour Party–Alliance government seized the opportunity to strengthen relations with the US, which had frayed in the 1980s due to Labour’s “anti-nuclear” posturing. Support for the US invasion and occupation was a quid pro quo for Washington’s endorsement of its own neo-colonial operations in the Pacific.

On October 3, 2001, the pseudo-left Alliance supported a motion in parliament, presented by Prime Minister Helen Clark, to endorse the government’s decision to send SAS troops to Afghanistan and to “totally” support “the approach taken by the United States of America.” The vote was intended to ensure the political establishment was solidly lined up behind the operation in order to derail the development of an anti-war movement in the working class and broader population.

There were 112 votes cast in favour; Labour 49; Alliance 10; National 38; ACT 9; NZ First 5; United NZ 1. The Greens, with 7 votes, opposed the resolution. The Greens and the Alliance at first unsuccessfully moved an amendment calling for the SAS operation to be carried out “in accordance with international law, with the objective of apprehending terrorists and bringing them to trial, not for revenge or retaliation.”

Once the amendment failed, the Alliance voted for the main resolution. Party leader and Deputy Prime Minister Jim Anderton told parliament the war was necessary “to bring to justice the perpetrators, organisers, and sponsors of [the September 11] terrorist attacks.” In fact, it had nothing to do with stopping Al Qaeda, which was funded from Saudi Arabia and had previously been supported and armed by the US in its proxy war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

The role of the Alliance and Greens was to provide the right-wing Labour-led government with a “progressive” veneer. A key role was played by a number of ex-radicals, including former leaders of the Pabloite Socialist Action League (SAL): Keith Locke in the Greens,

Alliance member Matt Robson, who held the dubious post of Minister for Disarmament, and Mike Treen, who worked in Robson’s parliamentary office.

Pabloism developed as a faction within the Trotskyist movement in response to the restabilisation of capitalism after World War II. Its founder Michel Pablo asserted that social reality consisted of the capitalist regime versus the Stalinist world, thereby repudiating the fight for the political independence of the working class from both Stalinism and imperialism, and the perspective of socialist revolution. Trotskyists were directed to liquidate their organizations and to join Stalinist, social democratic and bourgeois nationalist parties, with the false claim that they could be pressured to move to the left.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, which today publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*, was established in 1953 to fight against the Pabloites’ betrayal and preserve the Trotskyist movement as the world party of socialist revolution.

In New Zealand, after the Pabloite SAL all but collapsed in the late 1980s, several ex-members joined the Alliance. This party was formed in 1991 to block the leftward movement of the working class following the pro-market onslaught by David Lange’s 1984–1990 Labour government. It was an amalgam of four capitalist parties, including the dominant party NewLabour, established in 1989 as a breakaway from Labour, and the Greens.

By 1993, the Alliance had built a following among sections of the middle class and workers bitterly opposed to Labour, which peaked at 18 percent. At the 1999 election, the Alliance gained 8 percent of the vote and 10 seats and joined Labour in government. The Greens, which had split from the Alliance in 1997, also backed the government.

As part of the Labour-led coalition, the Alliance played a similar role to the Greens in Germany, which voted for the war in Afghanistan. It anticipated the embrace of imperialism by leftist parties such as Rifondazione Comunista in Italy, France’s New Anti-Capitalist Party, the Syriza government in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

The Afghanistan debacle has now seen the ex-radicals scrambling to wash their hands of any culpability, using blatant lies and historical falsification. Former Alliance minister Laila Harre tweeted on February 17, after the announcement that New Zealand’s six remaining troops would be withdrawn: “20 years since the Alliance stood against this predictably destructive deployment. 20 years wasted on war.” Harre voted in favour of joining the war in 2001.

Treen recently posted on Facebook: “We can collectively be proud that ultimately we stood up against war and empire and were proved right.” Saying nothing about the Alliance’s support for war in

parliament, Treen sought to cover his tracks by reposting a December 2001 letter he wrote to the Labour Party on behalf of the so-called “Antiwar coalition,” unsuccessfully appealing to it to reverse course.

In November 2001, columnist and Alliance insider Chris Trotter reported in the New Plymouth *Daily News* from the party’s annual conference, saying it had been bombarded with “strongly-worded” resolutions from almost every one of the party’s regional bodies opposing the caucus’s pro-war position.

A principled fight to oppose the war would have required the condemnation of both the war and the Labour-led government, and a campaign to expel the right-wing Alliance leadership. According to Trotter, however, Treen, the leader of the “anti-war” faction, colluded with president Matt McCarten to present a toothless amendment calling for the party to “withdraw” support for the war. The motion failed, with the conference instead voting 85 to 61 for a meaningless “review” of its position on Afghanistan.

Writing on the *Daily Blog* on August 16, 2021, former Alliance MP Liz Gordon noted that the internal arguments in favour of the war centred “on the need to eliminate the Taliban” and end its “oppression of women and children.” Trotter used the same fraudulent “humanitarian” justification in an August 17 article, denouncing the allied troop withdrawal as “an historic betrayal and abandonment” of Afghanistan’s women and girls who were, he absurdly claimed, “emancipated” under the brutal occupation.

In April 2002, its usefulness to the ruling elite exhausted, the Alliance split apart following six months of internecine warfare exacerbated by the rightward, anti-working class movement of the ruling coalition and its craven support for the US-led war.

The Green Party, despite voting against sending troops, continued to act as the key prop of the Labour government. The Greens’ statements never challenged the imperialist aims and character of the Afghan war. Rather, to provide itself with a fig leaf, the party said military interventions should first be approved by the United Nations and according to “international law.”

The key player in this two-handed policy was foreign affairs spokesman Keith Locke, a leader of the SAL in the 1970s. In parliament, Locke highlighted the Greens’ support for military involvement in East Timor, where New Zealand’s strategic interests were directly at stake, and endorsed imperialist operations against Libya, Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia and Rwanda on the basis that “those charged with crimes against humanity” were being brought to justice.

After the Labour government in 2003 dispatched about 100 soldiers to join “Operation Enduring Freedom” as an occupying unit labelled a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), the Greens adjusted their position and endorsed the war. Following the death of soldier Tim O’Donnell in 2010, Locke told parliament that the Greens were “proud of the good peace-keeping and reconstruction work that our Provincial Reconstruction Team has done in Bamiyan province and we mourn the loss of one of its members.”

Despite its name, the PRT carried out very limited aid or reconstruction work. Its main job was to patrol the province and gather information, and to protect US intelligence officials who shared the NZ base in Bamiyan. In retaliation for O’Donnell’s killing, New Zealand’s SAS commandos attacked two villages, killing several civilians including children.

In April this year, Locke was rewarded for his lifelong services to capitalism when he was formally invested as a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit, one of the establishment’s highest honours. The citation recognised his “services to human rights advocacy.”

Whatever claims the ex-Pabloites and others from the Greens and Alliance milieu make about their “anti-war” stance, these parties are condemned by their support for imperialism. The pseudo-lefts all continue to support Labour—a party that has continually deployed troops to Afghanistan and Iraq, and strengthened the alliance with the US—as a “lesser evil” to the National Party. Many former Greens and Alliance members moved into other pro-capitalist organisations, including the Maori nationalist Mana Party, founded in 2011, and the trade union bureaucracy.

In opposition to the pseudo-lefts and their foul record on Afghanistan, the *World Socialist Web Site* from the very beginning unequivocally condemned the US-led invasion. In a statement on October 9, 2001 titled; “Why we oppose the war in Afghanistan,” the WSWS explained that Washington’s objective was to establish a client regime and move vast military forces into the resource-rich and strategically significant region. We do not need to withdraw or amend a single statement on the war over the past 20 years.

The Socialist Equality Group (NZ) insists that there can be no serious struggle against war outside of the fight to end the economic system which is its source: capitalism. The pseudo-lefts, including those who joined the Alliance and the Greens, bitterly oppose this perspective, because they represent sections of the upper middle class which have thoroughly integrated themselves into the capitalist establishment.

We urge workers and young people to draw fundamental political lessons from the betrayals of these parties and the embrace of imperialism by the pseudo-left in every country.

A genuine anti-war movement must be based on a socialist and internationalist program, capable of unifying working people in every country. It must be based on the working class, the vast majority of the population, which has no material interest in imperialist war. Of necessity, it must be completely hostile to, and independent of every capitalist party.

The building of such a movement is increasingly urgent. After the debacle in Afghanistan, the US is ramping up its threats and preparations for war against China, which Washington views as the main obstacle to its global hegemony. The fight to stop the drive towards a catastrophic world war requires a new political leadership. We urge readers to study the record of the WSWS and our elaboration of the socialist strategy to fight against war, and to join the Socialist Equality Group and build it as the New Zealand section of the ICFI.



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