

# New Zealand local elections highlight growing opposition to Labour government

Tom Peters  
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New Zealand's local council elections, held throughout the country from mid-September to October 8, resulted in defeat for mayoral candidates aligned with the Labour Party-Greens government.

Numerous media pundits described the outcome as a shift to the right, but the vast majority of people saw no compelling reason to vote for anyone. Nationwide, turnout was just 36 percent, a record low, down from 42 percent in the 2019 elections.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern sought to downplay the results, telling Radio NZ she does not see the results as a "simple straight reflection" of opposition towards her government. Speaking to TVNZ, she expressed concern about the low turnout, suggesting lamely that postal voting might be a "barrier" to participation, because fewer people are accustomed to using the postal service.

In fact, the defeat of prominent Labour-backed candidates obviously reflects mounting hostility towards the Ardern government, which is presiding over soaring social inequality, record levels of homelessness and a homicidal policy of mass COVID infection. In the absence of any genuinely left-wing alternative, conservative candidates were the main beneficiaries, for now.

At the national level, polls show support for the Labour Party has slumped to around 35 percent, about the same as the opposition National Party. The government, like others throughout the world, seized on the pandemic to hand over tens of billions of dollars to big business and the banks, fuelling rampant inflation and social inequality.

Meanwhile, COVID has been allowed to spread everywhere after the government scrapped its previous zero COVID policy in late 2021 and dismantled almost all public health measures. The virus has killed more than 2,000 people.

In the most significant mayoral contest, in Auckland,

Efeso Collins lost by about 50,000 votes to National Party-aligned Wayne Brown, who became the front-runner after far-right businessman Leo Molloy and other candidates dropped out of the race. Collins had been endorsed by Ardern and Labour, the Greens and the trade unions. In the capital, Wellington, the Greens' Tory Whanau was elected mayor, but Labour's candidate, Paul Eagle, suffered a resounding defeat, finishing in fourth place.

Dunedin's incumbent mayor Aaron Hawkins, from the Green Party, lost to rival independent councillor, Jules Radich, who received more than twice as many votes. Christchurch, Nelson, Invercargill and Rotorua all elected self-styled conservative mayors.

Rotorua, which normally votes Labour, has been at the centre of a major scandal centred on the government's failure to address homelessness. The state has crammed thousands of impoverished families into the city's motels, which have been converted into "emergency housing," which is typically unsafe and overcrowded.

In Auckland, New Zealand's biggest city with nearly a third of the country's population, only 31 percent of eligible people voted for the council. In the Manukau ward, an area with 180,000 residents, covering much of working class South Auckland, turnout was even lower at just over 21 percent.

Collins, previously a councillor representing Manukau, was promoted as a champion for this community, with a campaign largely based on highlighting his Samoan and Tokelauan background. A Labour Party statement in February said: "The party sees a Collins mayoralty as historic, and would represent the first Pacific mayor of the city." Collins told the *Spinoff* around the same time that former US President Barack Obama "really resonated with me and I guess him being an African American president, a leader of colour, I can relate to that."

The failure to generate support on the basis of racial identity politics will be viewed with concern by the

Ardern government, which boasted after the 2020 election that it had 10 MPs from Pacific Island backgrounds, Labour's biggest-ever Pacific caucus. Labour has for decades highlighted increasing racial and gender diversity at the top of society as a means of diverting attention from the widening gulf between rich and poor that cuts across all national and ethnic groups.

Oxfam this month ranked New Zealand 136th least equal in terms of wealth distribution, out of 161 countries. Food prices have soared by 8.3 percent in the past year, the biggest increase since 2009, and charities throughout the country have reported an explosion in demand.

While a small number of Maori and Pacific Islanders have been elevated into parliament, council chambers, academia and corporate boardrooms, the vast majority remain among the most impoverished sections of the working class. The Equal Opportunities Commissioner's Pacific Pay Gap report, released on October 12, found that on average Pacific men are paid 19 percent less than Europeans and Pacific women are paid 25 percent less.

South Auckland, which has the city's largest concentration of Pacific Islanders, has been one of the areas worst-affected by the pandemic and the social crisis. The local Middlemore Hospital is perhaps the most overcrowded and rundown in the country. The government estimated last year there were more than 7,800 homeless people in South Auckland alone.

Collins' campaign did not offer anything to meaningfully address this crisis. His main pledge was for free public transport, but he made clear that this would be funded by diverting hundreds of millions of dollars from other areas of spending.

Collins repeatedly emphasised his willingness to work collaboratively with big business and right-wing councillors. He touted his record of working alongside outgoing Labour Party mayor Phil Goff, who responded to the pandemic by slashing more than 600 council jobs and raising rates. In June 2020, Collins declared: "Unfortunately, there's going to be cuts to our services, possibly cuts to jobs, and a whole range of things."

Collins was incapable of presenting a convincing alternative to his main rival, incoming mayor Wayne Brown, a property developer and former director on several corporate boards, including energy companies Transpower and Vector and state broadcasters TVNZ and Maori TV. A feature of the various mayoral debates was Collins and Brown declaring their friendship.

Brown foreshadowed deeper cuts to spending and policies to encourage business owners and developers like

himself. During one *New Zealand Herald*-hosted debate, Brown boasted about his record of slashing \$100 million in operating costs from Auckland Hospital when he was chairman of the District Health Board in the early 2000s.

The pro-government *Daily Blog* reacted with rage to Brown's victory, which editor Martyn Bradbury blamed not on Labour's right-wing policies but on "the boomer generation [seeking] to hold onto their privilege and power." In an effort to whip up racism, he also asserted that the "Chinese-Auckland electorate of 200,000" was "quietly instrumental" in the election outcome. Bradbury supports Labour's military spending and integration of New Zealand into the US war drive against Russia and China.

In fact, to the extent that Brown received any support beyond the richest Auckland residents, he did so by exploiting anger with the Ardern government. During one televised debate, he declared: "I think we've got to boot the government out of Auckland. Their job is to send us the money, not tell us how we live in our city."

Brown, however, won with just over 180,000 votes in a city of 1.65 million people, reflecting widespread opposition to the whole political establishment. As political columnist Bryce Edwards noted, "most elected local politicians... have a legitimacy problem, supported by very few voters."

The working class is moving to the left under the impact of the social crisis. As the council elections unfolded, tens of thousands of workers were seeking to fight back against a virtual wage freeze imposed by the state and private employers and enforced by the union bureaucracy. Nurses recently refused extra shifts in protest against dangerous understaffing and low pay, firefighters held two nationwide strikes in August, and 7,000 university staff took strike action on October 10.

The local election results reinforce the urgent need for workers to build rank-and-file workers' committees and a party based on socialist internationalism to unite their struggles and to establish the political independence of the working class from all the parties of big business and the unions that prop them up.



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