

New Zealand Labour Party installs new right-wing PM

Tom Peters
22 January 2023

Over the weekend, following the sudden resignation of Jacinda Ardern as New Zealand's prime minister, the ruling Labour Party caucus endorsed senior minister Chris Hipkins as her replacement. Hipkins was chosen unopposed to head the party and government in the lead-up to the October 14 election.

Ardern announced her departure last Thursday, declaring that she was worn out from leading the country during multiple crises and wanted to spend time with her family.

The reality is that despite being glorified in the world's media as a "liberal icon" and feminist hero, Ardern and her right-wing government have become increasingly unpopular. All of Ardern's rhetoric about "kindness" and her promises to alleviate poverty and homelessness have been exposed as a fraud.

The Labour government exploited the pandemic to carry out an historic transfer of tens of billions of dollars to big business and the banks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Soaring inflation is now driving hundreds of thousands of people into poverty, while more than 3,000 people have died in the past year as a result of the adoption of the homicidal "let it rip" policy demanded by big business.

In every country, the ruling class is now seeking to impose the full burden of the global economic crisis, triggered by the pandemic and made worse by the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, onto the backs of working people.

Ardern's departure, as the WSWs noted, follows demands for an even more brutal assault on workers' living standards. The Reserve Bank is seeking to engineer a recession and higher unemployment to drive down wages. Ardern has signalled that she does not feel up to the task of imposing this agenda and confronting the resistance that will inevitably emerge.

Ardern appears to have chosen Hipkins as her replacement. While most of the party was unaware of her impending resignation, she told him prior to Christmas that she was considering stepping down.

Hipkins is widely described as "Mr Fixit," Ardern's "attack dog," and as someone who will shift the government further to the right. His record includes enforcing austerity against striking teachers as education minister, dismantling public health measures as COVID-19 response minister, and imposing so-called "tough on crime" measures as police minister.

In his first media conference, Hipkins distanced himself from Ardern's slogan that she would make "transformational" changes, saying: "I'm not really interested in those kinds of catchphrases."

While stating that "many people in New Zealand, many families are struggling... worried about paying their grocery bills and paying their mortgages," Hipkins sought to dampen expectations of any significant steps to address the cost of living crisis. "New Zealanders," he said, "understand we cannot do everything and we certainly can't do everything all at once. They see the global economic pressures that New Zealand is up against."

Even as more than 50 people are dying and hundreds are being hospitalised each week due to COVID-19, Hipkins talked about the pandemic entirely in the past tense. He declared: "COVID-19 and the global pandemic created a health crisis, and now it's created an economic one, and that's where my government's focus will be."

After Ardern announced the scrapping of New Zealand's COVID elimination policy in late 2021, Hipkins oversaw the dismantling of public health measures, allowing the coronavirus to infect millions of people. On Twitter, he soon earned the nickname #LetitRipkins.

As education minister, he undertook the reopening of schools for in-person learning, which played a central role in unleashing COVID across the country. He defended the deliberate infection of children, telling *Newsroom* on May 18, 2022 that "a proportion of children will get COVID, that's just the reality of living in a community where COVID is circulating." He said people concerned about this were "catastrophising."

Before the pandemic, Hipkins had already established a reputation for ruthlessness, imposing the government's effective pay freeze and austerity across the education sector in the face of nationwide strikes by teachers in 2018 and 2019. This was done with the assistance of the education unions, which also prevented any organised resistance to the unsafe reopening of schools.

Hipkins' ministry has also overseen a funding freeze at universities as international student numbers dropped during the pandemic, resulting in hundreds of job losses. About 7,000

university staff held a nationwide strike last October demanding a real wage increase. The ongoing process of merging the country's 16 polytechnics (training institutes) into a single national entity, Te Pūkenga, is expected to involve more staff cuts.

None of this stopped Council of Trade Unions president Richard Wagstaff from congratulating Hipkins on becoming prime minister and declaring that the CTU had “worked closely with Hipkins, and we have been impressed by his commitment to addressing inequity.” The Labour government had “shown it has the wellbeing of working New Zealanders at its heart,” Wagstaff said.

The unions are playing a key role in imposing sellout pay agreements and preventing any organised fight for higher wages. Today, the CTU released a survey of 1,870 union members, showing that 44 percent had received no pay rise in the last 12 months. Three quarters said their incomes were not keeping up with inflation, which soared by 7.2 percent while food prices went up 11.3 percent in the last year.

Hipkins has also been involved in strengthening the repressive powers of the state to deal with the fallout of the social crisis. In June last year, Ardern made Hipkins minister of police following an hysterical “law and order” campaign by the media and opposition parties, which denounced his predecessor Poto Williams for failing to deal with an alleged “youth crime wave” and gang violence. Hipkins introduced new legislation that will give additional powers to police to search properties if they are believed to be occupied or owned by gang members.

There is no sign that a Hipkins-led government will make any significant change in foreign policy. In his press conference yesterday Hipkins declared that “our relationship with China is incredibly important, economically” and a visit to China would be “high on the priority list.”

The Labour government has deepened NZ's military alliance with the United States, including by sending hundreds of troops to the UK to help train and supply the Ukrainian military in the expanding US-NATO war against Russia. At the same time, Wellington has been reluctant to fully and openly join the far-advanced preparations for war against China, which is New Zealand's main trading partner. Hipkins' comments will be viewed with concern in US and Australian ruling circles, which want a much firmer commitment from Wellington to the drive towards another imperialist world war.

Hipkins' first action over the weekend was to appoint Carmel Sepuloni as the new deputy prime minister. Immediately, the race-obsessed media hailed Sepuloni, who has Tongan and Samoan heritage, as New Zealand's first Pacific Islander in such a senior position.

For the past five years as social development minister Sepuloni's main task has been to justify maintaining poverty-level welfare payments. She has also overseen the children's ministry, Oranga Tamariki, which has triggered protests for removing babies from young mothers.

The Labour Party's supporters, while still reeling from Ardern's resignation, are desperately seeking to promote illusions in Hipkins to save the party from a crushing election defeat.

Green Party co-leader James Shaw, who is the minister for climate change in the Labour-led government, praised Hipkins' record, telling reporters: “He's taken on some of the toughest jobs in government and done a really good job of them, so I think he'll be excellent.”

The liberal *Daily Blog* praised him as “ferociously bright, principled and clever.” The publication ludicrously painted the politician's career as “a celebration of NZ egalitarian meritocracy.”

On *Interest.co.nz*, pro-Labour pundit Chris Trotter cautiously hoped that Hipkins would “correct his party's currently suicidal political course” by backing away from “contentious” policies based on racial identity politics, such as Labour's move to give co-governance of water infrastructure to Māori tribes. A reversal on this front is unlikely given the powerful business interests behind the tribes, which successive Labour and National governments have sought to cultivate.

New Zealand Herald politics commentator Bryce Edwards wrote that Hipkins would shift the government “to the right economically” while falsely claiming that such an agenda would resonate with the “average voter” and so-called “middle New Zealand”—the very people who are already suffering from the Ardern government's right-wing policies.

In fact, while the political establishment lurches to the right, growing numbers of workers and young people are hostile to all the parliamentary parties and the capitalist system they uphold. Underlying Ardern's departure and the increasing political instability, an historic class polarisation is underway in New Zealand, as is the case internationally, setting the stage for explosive class battles.

The urgent task is the construction of a socialist and internationalist party that will politically lead the working class in the struggle against the Labour government and for the reorganisation of society on the basis of human need, not private profit.



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