

New Zealand pseudo-left group glorifies former PM Jacinda Ardern

Tom Peters
1 February 2023

The International Socialist Organisation (ISO) in New Zealand has joined numerous media commentators and politicians in lamenting the recent resignation of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and falsely presenting her as a progressive figure. This middle class, pseudo-left organisation is whitewashing the Labour Party-led government's right-wing record as it prepares to support Labour's campaign for the October election under the new leader Chris Hipkins.

In the article "After Ardern," published January 23, leading ISO member Dougal McNeill hails Ardern as a "sometimes inspirational" leader who showed "charisma" and "grandeur." He calls her "a master of detail and evidently a highly intelligent, highly skilled politician operating unflappably in the most stressful environment... patronised and goaded by male journalists clearly her intellectual inferiors."

Echoing the narrative peddled by the media and senior Labour Party politicians, McNeill writes that Ardern resigned after enduring a "vilely misogynistic" "torrent of threats, denigration, abuse and menace" from extreme right-wing and anti-vaccination groups. He urges readers who feel "frustrated and angry at the limitations of this government's vision and programme" to set these misgivings aside. "Left-wing instincts now should trust solidarity [with Ardern] over what seems like a critical attitude [towards her and her government]," he says.

This picture of an "inspirational" and "unflappable" leader persecuted relentlessly by right-wing internet trolls and sexist journalists is a ridiculous fantasy. While it is true that the far-right attacked Ardern, this abuse was vastly outweighed by an avalanche of praise from liberal media outlets and government leaders both internationally and in New Zealand. Over the past five years Ardern, more than any other politician on the planet, was glorified as the embodiment of "kindness" and as a role model for women and girls.

In urging people to solidarise themselves with Ardern, the ISO is using feminist identity politics to distract attention from the real reason for her departure: the collapse in support for Labour in the working class. Recent polls showed the party on 33 percent, down from 50 percent at the 2020 election.

The growing anti-government sentiment has nothing to do with sexism; it is in response to what is a vicious anti-working class agenda.

Labour's sharp drop in the polls followed its decision in late 2021 to abandon its previous COVID-19 elimination strategy, in favour of the homicidal policy of mass infection, which has killed more than 21 million people worldwide. Over the past year, New Zealand's COVID death toll has surged from about 60 to more than 3,000, and hundreds of thousands of people are thought to have Long COVID.

The government used the pandemic as the pretext to engineer a historic transfer of wealth to the rich. Tens of billions of dollars were handed out to big business and the banks, contributing to soaring profits, speculation in the housing market and price inflation.

Living standards are collapsing: inflation is 7.2 percent and food prices have risen more than 11 percent in the last year, outstripping meagre wage increases. More than 100,000 people are homeless due to soaring housing costs and more than one in five children are in poverty. The Reserve Bank is responding to the economic crisis by raising interest rates to drive up unemployment and further suppress wages.

As the WSWS explained, Ardern has stepped down precisely at the point where the ruling class is demanding a major escalation in attacks on the working class, including increased unemployment to drive down wages. She effectively signalled that she is not up to the task of leading this assault and confronting the mass opposition that will inevitably emerge.

The ISO downplays the worsening social crisis and falsifies the government's record, presenting it as progressive and reformist. In a thinly veiled swipe at the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand, McNeill criticises "socialists... [who] announce that there is no longer any genuine differences between the major parties, or that the government has not delivered reforms for working people, or that the whole thing is a side-show. The facts don't bear this out."

McNeill points to the elimination strategy implemented in 2020 and 2021, which "saved thousands of lives"—without mentioning the bailout of big business or the thousands of avoidable deaths since the public health measures were dismantled at the behest of the corporate elite.

He lists government policies aimed at promoting divisive gender and racial identity politics, including the creation of a new public holiday to mark the M?ori New Year; changes that

make it easier for transgender people to change their gender on their birth certificate; and legislation that removes abortion from the Crimes Act, making it easier to obtain the procedure.

The ISO presents this grab bag of policies as a progressive fig leaf for a pro-war government whose economic and healthcare agenda has resulted in thousands of deaths and is driving broad sections of the population into poverty.

McNeill also promotes blatantly pro-corporate measures, particularly the misnamed Fair Pay Agreements legislation, which he says makes “more space for unions.” This policy will expand anti-strike provisions while boosting the role of the union bureaucracy as adjuncts of the state and big business in suppressing wages.

The ISO has close ties with the unions, which serve as an industrial police force in the working class, enforcing job cuts and wage freezes. In 2021 McNeill, as the Tertiary Education Union branch president at Victoria University of Wellington, attempted to spin dozens of redundancies as a victory. The unions have also played a decisive role in facilitating the removal of public health measures and reopening universities, schools and businesses while COVID is out of control.

McNeill’s article does not mention the Ardern government’s support for the US and NATO imperialist powers in the war against Russia in Ukraine. Even as public hospitals and other vital services are starved for resources and staffing, millions of dollars have been found to help fund and train Ukrainian forces to serve as cannon fodder. The ISO has previously made clear that it backs this imperialist war and has echoed the propaganda depicting the US-NATO stooge regime in Kiev, which is dominated by right-wing nationalists and outright fascists, as progressive and democratic.

Labour’s pseudo-left supporters depict Ardern as the innocent victim of the extreme right, but the fact is that her government bears responsibility for emboldening these elements. From 2017 to 2020, Ardern led a coalition government with the Greens and the right-wing nationalist New Zealand First Party, whose leader Winston Peters was deputy prime minister. The ISO enthusiastically applauded the formation of this government.

As well as supporting war abroad, NZ First and Labour continually whipped up xenophobia, particularly against Chinese and other Asian immigrants, scapegoating them for the housing crisis and social inequality using language indistinguishable from that of the far-right.

The Ardern government also adopted the key demands of the right-wing protesters who occupied parliament’s lawn in early 2022, including Destiny Church and the anti-vax Voices for Freedom group, for an end to lockdowns and vaccine and mask mandates for COVID-19.

The ISO is one of several middle class, pseudo-left tendencies internationally which promote the fiction that capitalism can still offer progressive reforms when parties like Labour and its ally, the Greens, are in charge.

The biggest ISO branch in the ~~imperialist~~ ^{imperialist} United States 2019 after a murky #MeToo scandal. Several of its leading members then joined the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a branch of the Democratic Party. The DSA is currently in a crisis after its members in Congress voted to provide tens of billions of dollars for war, and to illegalise a potential strike by 100,000 railroad workers.

In New Zealand the ISO plays the same basic role of seeking to corral workers and young people behind the capitalist political establishment. The group’s fawning over Ardern is further evidence that it has nothing to do with socialism; it speaks for sections of the upper middle class, particularly those concentrated around the unions and academia, who are organically hostile to any movement of the working class that would threaten their own privileges.

Prior to the 2017 election, in opposition to the ISO and similar groups, the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) warned: “There can be no return to the period of national reforms. If Labour is elected, those workers and youth currently supporting Ardern will quickly be disillusioned.” New Zealand would be further integrated into imperialist war plans and social inequality would continue to widen. This prognosis has been vindicated.

As another election approaches, sharp political lessons must be drawn from the reactionary record of the Ardern government. Regardless of whether the conservative opposition National Party wins or Labour manages to remain in power, workers will face an intensified onslaught against their living conditions, continued mass infection from the coronavirus, and the immense danger of being plunged into a third world war.

What is required is a genuine socialist party, which fights to establish the political independence of the working class from the Labour Party, the Greens, the union apparatus and their pseudo-left supporters. Such a party must unify the working class internationally to overthrow capitalism and reorganise society to address human needs and put an end to inequality, exploitation and war. We urge readers who agree with this perspective to contact the SEG, the New Zealand supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact