

New Zealand election debate points to bipartisan agenda of austerity and war

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The first televised debate of the New Zealand election campaign, between incumbent Labour Party Prime Minister Chris Hipkins and opposition National Party leader Christopher Luxon, served to highlight the fundamental agreement between the two big business parties. Whoever leads the government after the October 14 election will impose billions of dollars in cuts to public services, while keeping taxes low for the rich and diverting more funding to the military and “law and order.”

The most urgent issue facing the world’s population—the explosive geopolitical crisis and the risk of world war—was touched on for barely one minute in the hour-long debate, when TVNZ moderator Jessica Mutch-McKay asked the two leaders: “If China was to invade Taiwan, what would you do?”

Hipkins objected to the question, saying: “I don’t think we should talk about hypotheticals like that, which is so serious and is something which the whole world should do everything we can to avoid. I don’t think armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait is going to be good for the world and New Zealand should use all of its diplomatic might, whatever that might be, to try and avoid that situation.”

Luxon said there was “bipartisanship” on foreign affairs and he agreed that it was “not helpful having a speculative hypothetical like that.”

Conscious of widespread anti-war sentiments in the population, both leaders agree that war must not become an election issue. The New Zealand ruling elite is also nervous about antagonising China, which takes roughly 30 percent of New Zealand’s exports.

Far from taking a diplomatic approach to avoid war, however, successive Labour and National governments have strengthened New Zealand’s alliance with US imperialism, and the current Labour-Greens coalition government has aligned the country with the US war against Russia and war plans against China.

Labour’s Defence Minister Andrew Little recently stated that New Zealand could be “called on to play a role should conflict break out [in the South China Sea]. We need to be

equipped for that and prepared for it.” Both major parties are committed to massively increasing New Zealand’s military spending from around 1.4 percent to 2 percent of gross domestic product—which was not mentioned in the TVNZ debate.

The media speculation about whether China will invade Taiwan is intended to obscure the reality that Washington is actively seeking to goad Beijing into such an attack. The Biden administration has deepened Trump’s economic warfare against China and the US has militarised the entire Indo-Pacific region, including by sending troops and weapons to Taiwan.

The aim of US imperialism and its allies is nothing less than the redivision of the world, in order to plunder the resources of Russia and especially China, which is the main rival to US economic dominance. New Zealand is actively supporting the US-NATO proxy war against Russia over Ukraine, which is the opening stage of a third world war.

On domestic policy, neither Luxon nor Hipkins offered anything to alleviate the worsening social crisis. Both parties have committed to slashing public spending to impose the burden of the economic crisis on working people and to fund the military.

Hipkins vaguely told viewers that Labour would “keep helping you with the cost of living,” but he was forced to admit that “we haven’t fulfilled all the commitments that we’ve made” since Labour first formed a coalition government in 2017.

In fact, the promises made by Hipkins’ predecessor Jacinda Ardern—which included the construction of 100,000 affordable houses, the elimination of child poverty, and three years of free tertiary education—have proven to be a complete fraud.

Labour’s main promise for 2023 is to remove the goods and services tax from fruit and vegetables. This would save families a negligible \$5 a week, which would be cancelled out by inflation.

Hipkins claimed that Labour had reduced the proportion of children living in poverty, from 22.8 percent in 2017 to 15.4

percent last year. But this does not take into account the soaring cost of living, including a 12.5 percent increase in the cost of food in the 12 months to June.

Roughly 100,000 people are either homeless or living in grossly inadequate housing, and more than 24,000 households are on the social housing waiting list, up from 5,000 in 2017. Hipkins and Luxon refused to address the housing crisis, with both promising to build just 1,000 new state houses per year.

Hipkins doubled down on his refusal to increase tax on the rich through a wealth tax or a capital gains tax, despite figures showing a historic level of concentration of wealth among the country's richest 311 families.

Meanwhile Luxon defended the National Party's plan to cut taxes by \$14.6 billion, which will primarily benefit the super-rich while delivering about \$10 a week for a low-paid worker. This will be funded partly by a tax on foreign property buyers, and with a 6.5 percent cut to spending on all government agencies, which Luxon falsely claims will not affect "frontline" services including health and education.

Hipkins accused Luxon of "not telling New Zealanders what they're going to cut." The Labour Party is running a campaign ad calling on voters to "stop the cuts before they start." Labour itself, however, has committed to austerity measures, including cuts of at least 2 percent from all public services. This is only the beginning of what will be demanded by the ruling class.

Public health services are already facing a deep crisis, with emergency departments frequently overwhelmed and a shortage of doctors, nurses and other staff, made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite thousands of people continuing to die from COVID-19 every day, and new more infectious variants emerging, the debate only touched on the pandemic as a thing of the past. Hipkins cynically stated that New Zealanders "should be incredibly proud of our COVID-19 response, we had one of the lowest death rates from COVID-19 in the world."

In fact, the Labour government's removal of all public health measures to stop the spread of COVID in late 2021 has led to more than 3,300 deaths, with dozens of people dying every week. The number of people with Long COVID is estimated at 150,000, but New Zealand's only specialised public clinic for people with this debilitating condition is being forced to close at the end of the month due to funding cuts.

A substantial part of the TVNZ debate was devoted to a lurid discussion of "law and order," with Mutch-McKay citing a recent alleged murder by a 16-year-old and asserting that "getting tough on crime and keeping Kiwis safe is a

major concern for voting Kiwis." A survey by TVNZ actually found that 9 percent of voters identified crime as their top concern, compared with 28 percent citing the cost of living, 17 percent citing the economy and 14 percent citing healthcare.

To divert attention from the social crisis, and to deal with the inevitable consequences of their brutal austerity measures, both major parties are promising to get "tough on crime." Hipkins said the Labour government had recruited an additional 1,800 police officers and denounced the previous National government for cutting funding to the police.

Luxon hysterically declared that Labour had the "support of the gangs" and promised that a National government would ban gang insignia in public places. He attacked Labour for a decline in the prison population and called for teenage offenders to be sent to "boot camps" run by the army. Luxon glorified "our military leaders" as "our best leaders and mentors."

Polling shows a collapse in support for the major parties, with Labour on around 27 percent and National on 37 percent (according to the latest 1News-Verian poll). The National Party is widely expected to lead the next government, but it will need to form a coalition with the far-right ACT Party and possibly the nationalist New Zealand First Party.

According to the Electoral Commission, just 89.9 percent of eligible people are enrolled to vote, and only 64 percent of people aged 18 to 24—the demographic that has the lowest pay and is most affected by the rising cost of living.

Rejection of the established parties is not enough. To fight against war and for social equality, workers and young people must build a politically independent party based on socialism and internationalism.

We call on those seeking a way forward to read and share the Socialist Equality Group's election statement and attend the October 4 public meeting organised by the SEG and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality in Wellington, "A socialist perspective against war and austerity in New Zealand's crisis election."



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