

Next New Zealand government could include right-wing nationalist NZ First

Tom Peters

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On Monday, opposition National Party leader Christopher Luxon—widely expected to become New Zealand’s prime minister after the October 14 election—announced that he could form a coalition government with both the far-right ACT Party and the right-wing nationalist NZ First.

This ended months of speculation about whether National would work with NZ First, which is running a far-right campaign based on racist dog whistles against indigenous Māori, anti-immigrant xenophobia, anti-vaccine pseudoscience, and the demonisation of transgender people.

NZ First is being promoted by sections of the bourgeoisie amid a worsening crisis for the major parties. Support for the Labour government has collapsed due to rising anger over social inequality, soaring living costs, the housing crisis, the out-of-control COVID-19 pandemic and a public healthcare crisis.

Labour is polling around 26 percent, compared with the 50 percent it received in the 2020 election. There is no mass support for National, however, which is polling around 39 percent—not enough to govern alone.

Both major parties are pledging to cut billions of dollars from public services that workers rely on, and to strengthen New Zealand’s alliance with US imperialism as it escalates the war against Russia and prepares an even more devastating war against China.

As the political establishment lurches to the right, ACT and NZ First are increasingly setting the agenda. They are backed by powerful business interests, including New Zealand’s richest billionaire investor Graeme Hart, who has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to both parties. As is the case in Europe and America, far-right parties are being elevated to strengthen the state and stoke bigotry and racism in order to divide and derail the working class opposition to austerity and war that is starting to emerge.

In response to Luxon’s announcement, Labour Prime Minister Chris Hipkins told TVNZ, “A National-ACT-New Zealand First government would be a recipe for disaster... The only thing they’d be able to agree on is the fact that they want to cut everything.”

This is sheer hypocrisy. In the first place, Labour is already overseeing deep cuts and hundreds of redundancies in tertiary education and government departments. Healthcare workers and teachers have repeatedly held nationwide strikes in protest against declining real wages and a crisis of understaffing.

Secondly, the Labour Party and the Greens are responsible for giving NZ First extraordinary power in the 2017-2020 government, despite it getting only 7.2 percent in the 2017 election. Then-Labour leader Jacinda Ardern made NZ First leader Winston Peters both foreign minister and deputy prime minister. NZ First’s Ron Mark served as defence minister.

The coalition deal—falsely portrayed as progressive by Labour’s supporters in the unions, the *Daily Blog* and pseudo-left groups—included pledges to slash immigration, expand the police, and promote militarism.

Peters decided to form a coalition with Labour instead of the National Party after the US ambassador Scott Brown publicly criticised the 2008-2017 National government for its perceived hesitancy about supporting the Trump administration’s belligerent provocations against North Korea and China.

NZ First played a major role in supporting New Zealand’s military build-up and greater engagement with the US in the Pacific region to push back against China’s growing economic influence. As a minor imperialist power, New Zealand’s ruling elite depends on support from the US to uphold its neo-colonial interests in the Pacific.

The March 15, 2019 terrorist attack in Christchurch by fascist Brenton Tarrant, who massacred 51 people in two mosques, highlighted the consequences of the poisonous anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim chauvinism promoted by successive Labour and National governments, and most explicitly by NZ First.

Following this, NZ First’s support collapsed as it doubled down on attacking migrants, using rhetoric that resembled Tarrant’s statements. The party received just 2.6 percent of the vote in 2020, not enough to gain parliamentary seats.

In its campaign to return to parliament this year, NZ First is seeking to position itself to the right of National and even ACT. It is demanding reduced government spending, railing against socialism, and stoking racism and bigotry.

Among his role models, Peters often cites Singapore's founder and long-time leader Lee Kuan Yew, who turned the city into a deregulated haven for the super-rich, with extreme levels of social inequality enforced by a police state apparatus.

While Peters has criticised the National Party's proposed tax cuts for the rich as unaffordable, he has denounced Labour's allies, the Green Party and Te Pahi M?ori (the M?ori Party), as "communists" for proposing modest taxes on wealth. Meanwhile NZ First is calling for major attacks on vulnerable welfare recipients, including a lifetime limit of two years for unemployed people to receive welfare, aimed at pushing thousands off benefits.

Like ACT, NZ First is seeking to exploit widespread hostility to the divisive racist politics promoted by Labour and its allies and steer it in a reactionary direction. NZ First has made demagogic criticisms of the M?ori tribal corporations, which control billions of dollars in business assets. The party opposed Labour's creation of a separate M?ori health authority and Labour's so-called "co-governance" initiatives aimed at strengthening the role of the tribes in the management of water infrastructure and other areas.

NZ First has also attacked the use of M?ori language by government departments. In a particularly inflammatory speech in March, Peters described this as part of a "socialist" agenda and an "attack being waged on New Zealanders' culture, identity and sense of belonging."

Peters, who is part M?ori, recently provoked more controversy by claiming that M?ori are "not indigenous" because their ancestors came to New Zealand from other parts of the Pacific. This nonsensical idea—which implies that virtually nobody in the world is indigenous—is a key component of far-right ideology in New Zealand, including that of white supremacist groups.

In an attempt to outdo National and ACT's "law and order" policies, NZ First has called for the country's gangs, which include many M?ori, to be designated as "terrorist organisations." The party wants to open a special prison for gang members only.

Peters has also courted COVID-19 deniers and opponents of vaccination associated with the Voices for Freedom group, which led an occupation on the lawn outside parliament for three weeks in early 2022. The Labour government ultimately agreed to all the right-wing protesters' demands, ending vaccine and mask mandates and allowing COVID to spread unchecked throughout the

country, which has killed more than 3,400 people.

A major part of NZ First's election campaign is the demonisation of transgender people. The party is demanding a law to exclude transgender women from female public toilets. Peters has denounced sex and gender-related education in schools as a "woke social re-engineering programme for vulnerable undeveloped minds." These positions echo those of fascist governments in Florida and other US states, which are imposing censorship in schools and attacking the rights of LGBT people.

A National-NZ First-ACT government would be highly unstable. ACT has run attack ads declaring that Peters cannot be trusted because he was part of the previous Labour government. National leader Luxon has said he would prefer a two-party coalition with ACT. NZ First has demagogically opposed some National-ACT policies, notably a proposal to increase the retirement age from 65 to 67.

Whatever their differences, however, all the parties in parliament are united behind the core agenda of the ruling class: to slash spending on public services, drive down living standards, and militarise the country in preparation for war.

To prepare for the revolutionary struggles ahead, the working class needs its own party, based on socialism and internationalism. Working people must oppose the racism and nationalism of NZ First and ACT, as well as the divisive identity politics of Labour and its allies, by fighting for working class unity against capitalism and for the socialist reorganisation of the world in the interests of workers.

We call on readers to study the Socialist Equality Group's (SEG) election statement and attend the October 4 public meeting in Wellington hosted by the SEG and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, "A socialist perspective against war and austerity in New Zealand's crisis election."



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