

Landslide defeat for Labour in New Zealand election

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New Zealand's Labour Party government suffered an historic defeat in Saturday's election. According to preliminary results, Labour's support virtually halved from more than 50 percent in the 2020 election to 26.9 percent. This is the biggest swing ever recorded against a ruling party and Labour's second-worst result since 1928.

About one in five votes are yet to be counted, including those cast by voters outside their electorates, so the final result due on November 3 could change slightly.

Contrary to headlines in the *Guardian*, CNN and other corporate media outlets in New Zealand and internationally, the result does not represent a popular "shift to the right." Rather, it reflects growing anger and disillusionment with the right-wing program shared by the entire parliamentary establishment.

The conservative National Party, led by former Air New Zealand chief executive Christopher Luxon, received only 39 percent. National and its preferred coalition partner, the far-right ACT Party, with 9 percent, together have a precarious one-seat majority: 61 seats in the 121-seat parliament. They will likely need support from the right-wing nationalist New Zealand First (6.5 percent) to form a government, which will take weeks of negotiations.

The Electoral Commission estimates turnout among enrolled voters was 78.4 percent—3.8 points lower than 2020. Actual turnout is closer to 73 percent, taking into account about 7 percent of eligible people who did not enrol.

If one adjusts for more than 1 million eligible voters, one in four, who did not vote for anyone, National's support falls to only 22.6 percent. National, ACT and NZ First received just 31.6 percent combined.

This will be an extremely unstable coalition government with no mass support. ACT and NZ First are widely despised; the latter, in particular, ran a Trump-like campaign full of racist dog-whistles, climate change denial, anti-vaccination pseudo-science and anti-transgender bigotry.

The plans of all three parties include deep cuts to public services, thousands of layoffs, cutbacks to welfare, and the diversion of more funding to the military, police and prisons. This agenda will fuel a resurgence of working class opposition, as is taking place internationally.

Labour's landslide loss does not indicate support for this

agenda, but rather the opposite. It is the end product of six years of a Labour-led government which presided over soaring social inequality and a profound and worsening social crisis.

Like social democratic parties throughout the world, Labour transformed decades ago into an open instrument of the corporate and financial elite. It responded to the economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic by funnelling tens of billions of dollars to big business, through subsidies and bailouts, and monetary policies that pushed up rents and house prices.

Widespread anti-war sentiment likely contributed to the party's crushing defeat. The Labour government has strengthened ties with US imperialism, which is seeking to redivide the world at the expense of Russia and China. Labour, supported by the entire parliament, has sent troops to the UK to train forces for the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, and has made clear that New Zealand is prepared to support a US war against China.

During the final week of the election campaign, Labour and National joined the rest of the imperialist powers in backing Israel's brutal war against the people of Gaza—which is widely opposed among ordinary people in New Zealand. Under the fraudulent banner of Israel's "right to defend itself," Luxon and Labour's prime minister Chris Hipkins backed the genocidal onslaught, aimed at crushing a popular uprising by the Palestinian masses. On the day of the election, thousands of people rallied in Auckland to protest against the siege of Gaza.

In his concession speech on Saturday night, Hipkins was incapable of giving any explanation for the party's historic collapse, saying lamely: "When the tide comes in big, it goes out big."

He stated that "no government has replaced a prime minister in an election year and carried on to win." In fact, Labour was on track to lose well before the resignation of Jacinda Ardern as prime minister in January.

Hipkins touted the fact that New Zealand "recorded the lowest number of COVID deaths in the developed world," without mentioning that this was due to an elimination policy that Labour scrapped at the end of 2021 on the orders of big business. Contrary to claims in the corporate media, the elimination policy was overwhelmingly supported and was the

main reason Labour was re-elected in 2020. The government's support fell sharply in 2022 as COVID-19 spread unimpeded, infecting millions of people, with the trade unions enforcing the unsafe reopening of all workplaces and schools.

More than 3,400 people have died from the coronavirus, and tens of thousands have been hospitalised. Many are living with debilitating Long COVID which can impact every organ in the body. During the election campaign the corporate media and the parliamentary parties conspired not to discuss the public health disaster caused by the government's criminal policy of mass infection, even after Hipkins himself was infected for the second time.

Hipkins sought to portray the Labour government as a champion for "working people," claiming that Labour had "raised 77,000 kids out of poverty" and "built 13,000 new public homes."

Official figures show that as of 2022, 16.3 percent of children were living in poverty, defined as households making less than half the median income after housing costs. While this is lower than 22.8 percent recorded in 2018, it does not take into account soaring living costs over the last year, which have eclipsed median incomes and led to unprecedented demand for food parcels.

The housing crisis has, in fact, worsened under Labour. House prices and rents have increased dramatically, pushing thousands of families into homelessness and emergency housing. The waiting list for public housing has increased fivefold from 5,000 to 25,000 since 2017. Ardern's 2017 pledge to build 100,000 "affordable" homes was a sham: the Kiwibuild scheme has produced just 1,854 homes to date, which are being sold at unaffordable market rates.

Hipkins declared that Labour in opposition would "fight for those who stand to lose from [the new government's] proposed cuts."

This is another fraud. Austerity measures are already well underway and the Labour Party promised to slash 2 to 4 percent from government agencies' budgets if re-elected. Hundreds of jobs are being lost in universities across the country and there is a staffing crisis in hospitals and schools, caused by successive budgets starving these essential services of funds.

Labour's biggest losses were in working class areas, which have been worst affected by the social crisis, driven by low voter enrolment and turnout. In Māngere, South Auckland, the party got 24,167 votes in 2020 and just 12,077 in 2023; in nearby Manurewa, Labour's vote more than halved from 22,137 to 10,409; in Mana, north of Wellington, it collapsed from 25,271 to 13,718. Many other examples could be given.

A significant factor in the election outcome is the alienation of young workers from the entire parliamentary set-up. As of September 30, only 66 percent of people aged 18 to 24 were enrolled to vote, compared with 90.5 percent for the overall adult population. In some working class electorates, less than half of young people were enrolled.

A number of Labour's "stronghold" electorates have been lost or are under threat. Labour's foreign minister Nanaia Mahuta lost her seat in the Māori electorate of Hauraki-Waikato to Te Pāti Māori's 21-year-old candidate Hana-Rawhiti Maipi-Clarke. In Mount Albert, the electorate held by Ardern until she resigned, the National Party's Melissa Lee is just 106 votes behind Labour MP Helen White. In the capital, Wellington, Green Party candidates won two seats previously held by Labour.

The Green Party increased its support nationwide from 7.9 in 2020 to 10.8 percent, while Te Pāti Māori (TPM) went from 1.2 to 2.6 percent. Both made gains at Labour's expense after campaigning for modest taxes on wealth and increased welfare benefits, among other limited reforms, none of which would ever be agreed to by Labour. The Greens have been part of the Labour-led government for the past six years and are complicit in all its right-wing policies, while TPM was part of the National Party government from 2008-2019.

Some of Labour's supporters—including *The Daily Blog's* Martyn Bradbury—have already begun to slander the population as "racist" and reactionary for failing to return the party to power. Such claims cover up the fact that Labour and the Greens formed a coalition government with the overtly racist and anti-immigrant NZ First from 2017 to 2020, with the support of the pseudo-left groups and *The Daily Blog*. Several predominantly immigrant areas of Auckland voted against Labour, undoubtedly based on its record of promoting anti-immigrant chauvinism.

The election result, despite superficial appearances, points to increasing class polarisation and a movement to the left, particularly among young people. In the absence of a genuine socialist party, this is mainly expressed in the low voter turnout, with the political vacuum filled by deeply unpopular right-wing parties.

The task facing socialist-minded workers and youth in the wake of the election is to prepare for the revolutionary struggles that will erupt against war and austerity, by taking up the struggle to build the socialist and internationalist alternative to all the capitalist parties. This means joining the Socialist Equality Group and fighting to build it as the New Zealand section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement.



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