

Why the working class turned against Labour in New Zealand's election

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Following the Labour Party government's historic defeat in New Zealand's October 14 election, the corporate media quickly declared that voters had "moved sharply to the right" (*Washington Post*) delivering what the UK *Guardian* called "a surge in support" for the conservative National Party and its allies. The New Zealand media is full of references to a "blue wave" of support for National.

A *New Zealand Herald* editorial states that Labour lost because it had no "clear messaging," and "Right-wing populists tend to be better at cutting through to people and forming a connection than centre-left communicators." Pro-Labour Party columnist Josie Pagani posted on X: "Labour must avoid the trap of thinking it failed because it wasn't left wing enough. Sobering fact—the majority of voters just voted for parties on the right. Only a third for parties on the left."

This is a gross distortion of reality. While the vast majority of voters rejected the Labour government—whose support plummeted from 50 percent in the 2020 election to 26.9 percent—there is no mass support for the right. The preliminary results reflect opposition to the entire political establishment. (About one in four votes—mainly cast by people outside their electorates—are still being counted and the final results will be known on November 3.)

National received only 39 percent of the votes. As the WSWS noted, if one adjusts for one in four eligible people—more than 1 million—who did not vote in the election, National received just over 22 percent and the far-right New Zealand First and ACT parties got less than 10 percent combined. The three parties are in negotiations to form what will be a highly unstable and unpopular coalition government.

Millions of working people rejected Labour because of its thoroughly right-wing record. The party ditched any adherence to limited, socially progressive policies four decades ago. It represents the interests of big business and sections of the upper middle class, no less than National.

The Labour Party governed in coalition with the Greens and the right-wing nationalist NZ First from 2017-2020, and then with the Greens from 2020-2023. Throughout this period, its policies produced a catastrophic increase in social inequality, poverty and homelessness. Public services were starved of funds, provoking repeated strikes by tens of thousands of teachers and healthcare workers.

The media commentary on Labour's collapse ignores the party's enthusiastic support for wars fomented by US imperialism. Labour sent NZ troops to Britain to train Ukrainian conscripts for the US proxy war against Russia, and signalled its commitment to the US build-up to war against China. There was virtually no discussion of foreign policy during the election campaign because Labour and National, and their allies, agree with New Zealand's alliance with the United States.

In the final days of the campaign, Labour and National both supported Israel's "right to defend itself," which provided the fraudulent pretext for unleashing a genocidal assault against the population of Gaza. On election day, thousands of people in New Zealand joined the worldwide protests against Israel's bombing of the city and in support of Palestinians' fight

for freedom.

The government's stance likely contributed to the humiliating defeat of Labour's foreign minister Nanaia Mahuta, who lost the Māori electorate of Hauraki-Waikato to 21-year-old Hana-Rawhiti Maipi-Clarke of Te Pāti Māori. Mahuta was one of Labour's most senior MPs who had been in parliament for 27 years.

The most significant factor in Labour's crushing defeat is the cost-of-living crisis. During the election campaign Prime Minister Chris Hipkins sought to cover up the crisis by repeating the dubious claim that the government had lifted 77,000 children out of poverty. This is based on official figures showing the proportion of children living in households making less than 50 percent of the median income after housing costs fell from 22.8 percent in 2018 to 15.4 percent in mid-2022—a decrease from 253,800 to 176,800 children living below the poverty line.

These figures are more than a year out of date and do not account for the recent dramatic surge in living costs, especially for food and rent. According to the New Zealand Food Network, in the last six months alone, the number of people relying on food banks at least once a month increased 20 percent, from 450,000 to 600,000, which is 11 percent of the population.

The housing crisis has pushed 25,000 people onto the waiting list for public housing, up from 5,000 in 2017. Approximately 100,000 people are estimated to be homeless.

Meanwhile, the banks have repeatedly announced record profits, and property investors have expanded their wealth thanks to the Reserve Bank's quantitative easing, as well as tens of billions of dollars in government subsidies for big business during 2020 and 2021.

To divert attention from the social crisis, Labour has sought to blame its defeat, especially in Auckland, on alleged opposition to public health measures taken during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hipkins told Radio NZ on Wednesday: "It's clear that from the end of 2021 we saw our support numbers drop quite significantly... we lost a lot of support in Auckland during that last lockdown period and we haven't regained it back." Senior Labour MP Andrew Little, who announced his retirement this week, similarly told Radio NZ that the party's loss of support in Auckland "was a consequence of the COVID response and just the extraordinary level of disruption," compounded by "tough" economic conditions.

Labour's supporters in the media are echoing this theme. The *Daily Blog's* Martyn Bradbury declared: "That voters didn't care National, ACT and NZ First would unleash madness highlights how much voters were burnt by Covid lockdowns and Labour's grotesque incrementalism."

These claims are false. Labour was re-elected with an absolute majority in parliament in 2020, despite growing social inequality, based on its initial response to the pandemic, which the government described as an elimination strategy. Fearful of opposition among health workers and the broader working class, from March 2020 prime minister Jacinda Ardern imposed a series of lockdowns and border controls which initially kept

New Zealand largely free from COVID.

Under pressure from the financial elite in New Zealand and internationally, on October 3, 2021 Ardern announced an end to the elimination policy. A lockdown that had been imposed in Auckland in August to suppress a COVID outbreak was eased in September, allowing the virus to spread, and then completely lifted in December, with the government falsely claiming it was impossible to stop the Delta variant.

The *New Zealand Herald*, in its analysis of the election result, cites a Taxpayers' Union Curia poll showing that the share of voters who believed the country was going in the wrong direction "rose sharply" from 26 percent in September 2021 "to 36 per cent in October, and 45 per cent in November, as the lockdown was repeatedly extended." The *Herald* does not mention Ardern's announcement at the start of October that the overwhelmingly popular elimination strategy would be scrapped.

Labour's support in opinion polls plummeted from around 45 percent for most of 2021 to the low 30s in 2022 not because of lockdowns—which the government never reintroduced—but because of the worsening social crisis and the public health catastrophe that it knowingly unleashed on the population.

New Zealand went from near-zero transmission of COVID and just 30 total deaths, as of October 2021, to having among the highest weekly COVID deaths per capita of any country in mid-2022. The pandemic death toll now stands at more than 3,400, with hundreds being hospitalised and about 20 people dying each week.

Impoverished areas such as South Auckland have been worst affected, with frequent reports of overcrowded hospitals, driven by COVID combined with chronic underfunding of the health system. Long waiting times at emergency departments and for vital surgeries have led to several avoidable deaths.

In these working-class areas, Labour's support dropped primarily due to low turnout—not support for National. The Electoral Commission estimates that nationwide turnout among enrolled voters was 78.4 percent—3.8 points lower than 2020. But in Manurewa, a South Auckland electorate often described as a "safe Labour seat," turnout collapsed by about one third from 30,468 in 2020 to 20,215 three years later, according to the preliminary figures.

Labour still gained the biggest share of the party votes in Manurewa, with 10,409 votes, but this is less than half the 22,137 it gained in 2020. Meanwhile National only increased its vote from 3,904 to 5,807.

The same pattern is repeated in other impoverished Auckland electorates including Māngere and Panmure-Ōhau. Even allowing for the turnout to increase slightly once special votes are counted on November 3, the drop in all these areas is dramatic.

In the electorate of Hutt South, north of Wellington, total votes cast fell from 45,625 to 33,035. This produced a victory for the National Party and its candidate Chris Bishop, even though National's party vote only increased from 10,033 to 11,338. Labour's party vote collapsed from 25,159 to 10,806.

The WSWS interviewed workers in Hutt South in the lead-up to the election, many of whom had supported Labour in the past but were deeply disillusioned and angered by rising living costs and homelessness, which some had personally experienced. Several people said they had decided not to vote for anyone.

In the lead-up to the election the *Daily Blog* accused those planning to vote for National and its allies of "racism." This ignores Labour's anti-immigrant policies, which undoubtedly contributed to the swing against the party in areas with significant migrant populations.

Senior Labour MP Michael Wood lost his Auckland electorate of Mount Roskill, previously considered a "safe Labour seat," where 48.5 percent of the population identifies as Asian. National's Carlos Cheung, a Chinese New Zealander, won the seat. In New Lynn, with a 36 percent Asian population, Labour's Deborah Russell lost to National's Paulo Garcia,

who is of Filipino descent.

From 2017-2020 Labour governed in a coalition with NZ First, a party notorious for demonising Muslims, Chinese and Indian migrants. From 2020-2022 the Ardern government operated one of the most restrictive border regimes in the world, with a limited number of hotel quarantine places reserved for residents returning to New Zealand.

While border quarantine was necessary to stop the spread of COVID, the government limited the number of places available. Thousands of work visa holders were shut out of the country, including many who had homes, jobs and families in New Zealand, while people applying for residency faced interminable delays. Thousands of migrants protested against these measures.

Outside the urban centres, Labour suffered heavy losses in the East Coast and Hawke's Bay, where thousands of homes and farms were destroyed or damaged during Cyclone Gabrielle in February. Hundreds of families are embroiled in disputes with insurance companies over repairs, while others have received buyout offers from the government and local councils that will likely leave them worse-off.

One of Labour's most significant defeats was the South Island seat of West Coast-Tasman. The region is often called the "birthplace" of the Labour Party and New Zealand's trade unions because of the role played by party founders in the major 1908 Blackball coal miners' strike. Labour has held the electorate almost continuously since 1928, except for 1990-1993. In last week's election, Labour's agriculture and trade minister Damien O'Connor lost the seat after holding it since 1993.

Labour's party vote in the electorate more than halved from 20,521 in 2020 to 8,732, but National's only increased slightly from 10,934 to 12,224. Turnout was down slightly and ACT, NZ First and the Greens all increased their support.

The large, sparsely-populated electorate includes the site of the Pike River mine disaster in 2010, where 29 workers were killed because Pike River Coal placed profits and production ahead of safety. The company was assisted by the trade union bureaucracy, which knew about the extremely unsafe conditions in the mine but said nothing and allowed production to continue.

Labour, the Greens and NZ First all promised in 2017 to re-enter the mine to recover evidence, as well as human remains, in order to finally hold those responsible to account. Six years later, however, no one has been brought to justice. The mine was only partially re-entered, and in 2022 the Labour government permanently sealed it, preventing vital evidence from being recovered. This action triggered protests by families of the victims, supported by thousands of workers throughout New Zealand and internationally.

Anger over the Ardern-Hipkins government's betrayal of the Pike River families, and the ongoing cover-up of the disaster, has certainly contributed to Labour's defeat.

In the absence of a genuine socialist alternative to all the capitalist parties, the main beneficiaries of Labour's bloodbath in the short term are National and its far-right allies.

Labour's support parties also increased their votes at Labour's expense, with Te Pahi Māori (TPM) going from 1.2 to 2.6 percent and the Greens from 7.9 to 10.77 percent. The Greens gained ground particularly in central Wellington, where both Labour and National pledged to slash tens of thousands of public sector jobs.

Notwithstanding their populist rhetoric, including calls for a wealth tax and other minor reforms, TPM—which was a coalition partner in the 2008-2017 National-led government—and the Greens have both been part of governments which carried out attacks on workers' living standards. Neither represents a genuine alternative.

The election demonstrates that the working class in New Zealand is politically disenfranchised by a parliamentary system which is lurching to the right. Large numbers of workers abstained, and many of those who

voted did so negatively, casting a protest vote against Labour, or voting reluctantly for Labour or one of its allies as a “lesser evil” against National and its allies.

The result is a far-right government that is preparing major attacks on workers at home, and will accelerate the militarisation of society in preparation to join new imperialist wars. The National-ACT-NZ First coalition’s agenda—expected to include initial cuts of at least 6.5 percent to 24 government agencies—will provoke intensified opposition from the working class.

What is urgently required is a revolutionary socialist perspective and party, capable of uniting workers across New Zealand and internationally against austerity and war. We call on workers and young people who are seeking a way forward in the fight against capitalism, and the parliamentary parties which all uphold it, to contact the Socialist Equality Group and join the fight to build the New Zealand section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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