

Incoming New Zealand government prepares sweeping attack on public education

John Braddock
30 November 2023

On November 27, New Zealand's conservative National Party leader Christopher Luxon was sworn in as prime minister after securing a coalition deal with two widely despised far-right parties, ACT and New Zealand First.

The coalition agreement brings into office the country's most right-wing government in decades. Its task will be to make drastic cuts to public services and ramp up the exploitation of the working class while increasing military spending to prepare the country to join imperialist wars.

None of the parties has any significant popular support. National only got 38 percent of the votes, while ACT received 8.6 percent and NZ First just 6 percent. Amid widespread alienation from the entire parliamentary set-up, roughly one million eligible adults—one quarter—did not vote for anyone.

In line with the turn by ruling elites around the globe which are bringing far-right and fascistic formations into official politics, ACT and NZ First wield far more power than their paltry electoral support justifies. NZ First leader Winston Peters and ACT's David Seymour share the position of deputy prime minister. Peters takes the crucial foreign affairs portfolio while Seymour becomes minister for regulation and associate minister of education, finance and health.

Seymour's positions overseeing key sections of the public sector are a sharp warning to the entire working class. ACT is a "libertarian" big business mouthpiece that has long campaigned for reduced taxes, "smaller government," less "red tape" and minimal employment protections.

In education, the government has adopted ACT's policy of reintroducing privately-run, publicly funded Charter schools and NZ First's reactionary policy of ending sex and gender education. Its so-called "back to basics" approach includes mandated teaching hours for reading, writing and maths, regular testing in Years 3 to 8, and a

ban on students using mobile phones.

The promotion of Charter schools foreshadows an escalating privatisation agenda. Charter schools are free to operate outside the national system, setting their own curriculum, hours, staff requirements and pay rates.

Modelled on "for profit" schools in the United States, Charter Schools were first introduced in New Zealand in 2014 as part of ACT's confidence and supply agreement with the then National Party government.

The original schools, numbering 12 by 2019, were deemed a "trial," but warning signs quickly emerged. Among the first established was Vanguard Military Academy, based in north Auckland, operating on strict military-style discipline preparing students for the armed forces. It established a model for similar military and police "academies" in some 27 schools across the public system.

Māori entrepreneurs seized the opportunity to set up racially separatist schools under the rubric of education provided "by Māori for Māori." These were promoted on the reactionary basis that the public system had "failed" Māori students in particular who are broadly disadvantaged by the capitalist class system.

In 2015 a Charter school at rural Whangaruru, which received a \$1.6 million establishment grant from the government mostly used to buy a farm, was found to have "dysfunctional management" and was closed down by the Ministry of Education. Charter schools in the city of Whangarei unsuccessfully sought help from nearby public schools to help fill curriculum gaps. Many turned to the Ministry of Education for extra funding to cover financial shortfalls or mismanagement.

Charter school advocates falsely claim that they provide parents with "choice." In fact, evidence from the US shows that parents lost the right to send their children to the nearest school because the for-profit schools carefully vetted their intakes and refused to take students who

might require too much attention. The onus was on parents to find a school that would accept their child.

Due to widespread hostility in the working class and among teachers to the emerging privatised system, the Charter model was scrapped under the Labour government following the 2017 election, and the existing schools offered special deals to change into new “designated character” state schools.

The Charter model is now to be brought back, with the distinct difference that ACT proposes that any existing public school can apply to become a Charter school. They will be able to continue to receive state funding but also seek sponsorship and various deals with private enterprise while running as a stand-alone “business.”

The corporate sector will not only establish a direct foothold in determining education practices. Businesses will enrich themselves through ACT’s plan to do away with the national curriculum and establish a private sector “market,” in which schools purchase commercial teaching packages off the shelf, which writers can tender for in return for royalties.

The National-ACT coalition agreement also promises to “explore further options to increase school choice and expand access to integrated and independent schools including reviewing the independent school funding formula to reflect student numbers.” A vast funding increase is on the cards for the elite private schools and state-funded “integrated” religious schools to boost their numbers.

Underpinning the attack on public education is the myth that more parental “choice” is needed to deal with low-performing schools that are “failing” poorer students. Writing in *Stuff* on November 26, right-wing columnist Damien Grant decried “the single-payer model that consistently fails our children; especially those from under-resourced families who stand to gain the most.”

Charter school advocates have no interest in working class students, whose educational disadvantages are the product of broader class oppression within capitalist society. New Zealand already operates a two-class education system in which wealthy parents seeking to bypass the under-funded, under-resourced state system with its myriad problems can pay thousands of dollars to join the elite private school system.

Charter schools are a further step in the gutting and long-term running down of public education. The agenda builds on the “Tomorrow’s Schools” policy of competitive self-managing schools, introduced by Labour in 1989, which opened up a widening chasm between rich

and poor schools, resulting in students from the poorest schools struggling against enormous odds to achieve academic success.

Additionally, thousands of students planning to start university in 2025 will have to fund their first year of study following a change insisted on by Peters. Since 2018, eligible students have been able to have their first year’s tuition funded by the government. The fund is available to first-time tertiary students and covers one year of study or two years of work-based training up to \$12,000. Working class students finishing school next year will be hit hard by the change.

The teacher unions, the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI) and Post Primary Teachers’ Association, have either ignored or downplayed the new policies, thereby disarming both teachers and workers about the dangers. Neither union campaigned against them during the election, while NZEI this week complacently described Charter schools as a “weird, radical idea” that would not attract many applicants. Neither union has announced any campaign to fight them.

The wholesale assault on the social position of the working class and youth has sharply intensified the crisis facing all students. As the WSWS has noted, the “parental rights” and “school choice” campaign is “not an expansion of rights, but an Orwellian term for the destruction of the right to free, high-quality public education and culture.”

As capitalism descends further into crisis, the financial oligarchy considers the right of working people to a public education, founded in the democratic movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as an unacceptable deduction from private profits. The looming assault on public education is part of the intensified drive against democratic rights at home and to war abroad now being brought forward under the new government.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact