

New Zealand Labour Party feigns opposition to anti-China AUKUS military pact

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New Zealand’s right-wing National Party-led government released documents on August 2 which make clear that the previous Labour Party-led government—which lost the October 2023 election—had begun working towards joining Pillar 2 of the AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) military pact aimed against China.

The National-led coalition, which includes the nationalist NZ First Party and the far-right ACT Party, has ramped up its anti-China stance. It has strengthened New Zealand’s military ties with key US allies, including the Philippines, South Korea, Japan and Australia, and is signalling that it intends to join AUKUS Pillar 2.

AUKUS Pillar 1 will supply Australia with missiles and nuclear-powered attack submarines and vastly expand the US and British use of Australian military bases. Pillar 2, which will likely include Japan and South Korea, as well as New Zealand, would enhance the sharing of military and intelligence technology.

AUKUS is a key part of the war preparations with China, which the US sees as the major obstacle to its hegemony in Asia and globally. The explosive tensions with China, stoked by successive US governments over the South China Sea, the East China Sea and Taiwan, are threatening to erupt into a third front in a developing world war: the other fronts are the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza and attacks on Iran and Lebanon.

Speaking with the *Financial Times* on July 15, New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon said he was “very open” to joining AUKUS Pillar 2 and that he wanted NZ’s military to be “highly interoperable with Australia” and a “force multiplier for Australia and the US and other partners.”

In June, Defence Minister Judith Collins endorsed a US government “Statement of Principles for Indo-Pacific Defense Industrial Base Collaboration,” aimed at expanding weapons manufacturing across the region.

Nervous about the deeply ingrained anti-war sentiment in New Zealand—which has erupted in the ongoing nationwide

protests against the Gaza genocide—the Labour Party is seeking to verbally distance itself from AUKUS. On August 2 the party released a statement saying: “The government has failed to make a case for joining AUKUS Pillar 2 and Labour remains unconvinced that joining is in New Zealand’s interests.”

Such statements are thoroughly hypocritical and insincere. Cabinet papers from March 2023 show that the Labour-led government, which was supported by the Green Party, backed AUKUS. The Labour government stated: “New Zealand welcomes AUKUS as an initiative to enhance regional security and stability... We are interested in discussing opportunities for cooperation on the non-nuclear aspects under Pillar Two of AUKUS.”

When the pact was first announced in 2021, then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said she was “pleased to see” the growing orientation of the US and UK to the Pacific region.

Labour now says that it never intended to join AUKUS. The party’s foreign affairs spokesman David Parker told TVNZ on August 2: “Our role should be to make sure that the Pacific remains demilitarised and that we push for peaceful coexistence between superpowers rather than taking sides.” He said the government was compromising “New Zealand’s long independent foreign policy.”

In a statement, Parker asked: “Does the National led government see China as a military threat to New Zealand? And if they see US-China superpower rivalry as a threat to peace and security, why do they think backing the United States in its competitive struggle against China is a good way to avoid war or protect New Zealand’s national interests?”

All of this is a cynical attempt to obscure the real record of successive Labour governments in cementing New Zealand’s alliance with US imperialism.

References to New Zealand’s “independent foreign policy” are a fraud. For more than a century New Zealand, as a minor imperialist power, has aligned itself first with the British Empire, then after World War II with the United States, in order to defend its own neo-colonial interests in

the Pacific region.

The 1999-2008 government led by Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark, who is now criticising AUKUS, sent New Zealand's elite SAS commandos to join the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. The pseudo-left Alliance Party, part of the Labour-led coalition, supported the invasion.

Labour also deployed troops to the criminal war in Iraq, in order to protect commercial and military ties with the US. The Clark government significantly expanded intelligence collaboration with the US, through New Zealand's Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB), a member of the US-led Five Eyes network, which conducts global surveillance on behalf of the US and its allies the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

From 2017-2020 Jacinda Ardern's Labour government included the right-wing, anti-Chinese NZ First Party and the Greens as coalition partners. It issued repeated statements labelling China and Russia as "threats," echoing Washington's propaganda. NZ First leader Winston Peters, who was foreign minister in that government (as he is in the current National-led government) called for a greater US military presence in the Pacific to push back against China.

Just a year ago, in August 2023, Labour's Defence Minister Andrew Little released a Defence Policy Review aimed at strengthening ties with "our longstanding Five Eyes intelligence partners" and preparing a "combat capable, ready force."

Spelling out what it meant, Little said: "If for example conflict does break out in the South China Sea, where \$20 billion of our exports flows through every year, we have a stake in that, and we may be called on to play a role should conflict break out. We need to be equipped for that and prepared for it."

The bipartisan plan is to double military spending and significantly expand recruitment, which is being done at the expense of public healthcare and other vital services.

Labour's differences with AUKUS are purely tactical and are essentially a public relations exercise. The party is speaking for sections of the bourgeoisie who remain nervous about being seen to openly side with US warmongering against China, which remains New Zealand's largest trading partner. Above all, Labour is deeply concerned about the opposition among workers and young people who are being radicalised by Israel's genocide in Gaza—which the National government and Labour support—and are turning to the left.

Labour's Helen Clark and former National Party leader Don Brash invited Australian National University Professor Hugh White to speak against AUKUS in Wellington earlier this week. White told *Newsroom* that the US was "threatening to go to war with China if China's challenge becomes too overt; for example, if it launches military

operations against Taiwan." Saying that this would be "catastrophic," he called for compromises to avoid such a war.

White speaks for a minority of the Australian ruling elite which questions the wisdom of escalation against China, and which has been completely marginalised as successive governments have transformed the continent into a military base of operations for the US. White is not a principled opponent of militarism: as *Newsroom* pointed out, "he has previously suggested Australia almost double its defence budget and consider whether it should acquire nuclear weapons to protect itself."

There is no doubt that in the event of war between the US and China, White and others like him would fall into line. He told *Newsroom* and Radio NZ that he would much prefer for the Pacific region to be dominated by the US than by China, if this was possible.

The same can be said of Clark and Brash, and the Labour Party as a whole, which fully supports New Zealand's alliance with the US and Australia, and has joined wars in the Middle East and elsewhere. The last Labour government, backed by every party in parliament, sent troops to Britain to assist in training Ukrainian conscripts to fight against Russia—a war which is threatening to engulf Europe in a far wider and more devastating conflagration.

There is no anti-war faction in any of the capitalist parties. Labour and its allies should be judged not on their hypocritical posturing, but on their record and on the class interests they represent.

To stop the plunge into a catastrophic world war, the global protests against the genocide in Gaza must be broadened to also oppose the escalating war in Ukraine and imperialist warmongering against China. Workers and young people in every country must fight for the mobilisation of the working class, in strikes and other actions, to shut down the production and supply of weapons. Most importantly, the anti-war movement can only succeed if it is based on a socialist strategy to abolish the source of war: the capitalist system.



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