

New Zealand Labour Party leader postures as a “democratic socialist”

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20 November 2025

In an interview with Radio NZ (RNZ) on November 12, New Zealand’s opposition Labour Party leader Chris Hipkins sought to identify himself with New York’s mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani, a Democratic Party politician and self-described “democratic socialist.”

Hipkins declared that Mamdani’s victory showed there was “a big backlash against the system at the moment. People feel like the economic system isn’t working for them and they’re looking for alternatives.”

He continued: “We’ve had four or five decades around the world, now, of an economic system that says: don’t worry about concentration of wealth, eventually that will flow down, everyone will be better off. And a lot of people are looking at that going: that’s not us, that’s not what we’re experiencing, the cost of living’s getting more, we’re feeling more marginalised economically, our jobs are less secure, and they want something different.”

Asked if he considered himself a “democratic socialist,” Hipkins replied: “I don’t really have a problem with the label. Social democrat, democratic socialist, variants of the same thing: people who believe there is a more active role for the state.”

With an election less than 12 months away, NZ’s right-wing National Party-led coalition government is widely despised. The October 23 “mega strike” involving more than 100,000 healthcare workers and teachers—New Zealand’s biggest strike since 1979—revealed seething anger towards the relentless austerity measures, soaring living costs and obscene levels of social inequality. There is also widespread opposition to the government’s alliance with US imperialism and its support for the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Under these conditions, the Labour Party—one of the two main parties of big business and imperialist war—is positioning itself to try and trap workers and young people who are moving to the left. The great fear of the ruling elite is that working class anger could erupt outside of the control of the capitalist parties and the corporatist union bureaucracy.

The same processes are underway in the United States. Support for Mamdani indicates a profound shift to the left among workers and young people in the US, a country where socialism and communism have been relentlessly demonized by the entire political and media establishment for decades.

The WSWs has warned, however, that Mamdani is no socialist: he is a Democratic Party politician and member of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America, which represents layers of the affluent middle class. Like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders—two other self-styled “democratic socialists” who lined up completely with the right-wing, pro-genocide Biden administration—Mamdani is using populist phrases to divert the

growing movement against the fascistic Trump administration behind the Democrats, the party that enabled Trump’s rise and has done nothing to oppose his relentless assault on democratic rights.

Mamdani’s relatively minor reform proposals—free public transport, rent caps on some housing, free childcare and a council-run supermarket—will not be implemented if they in any way undermine the profits of the Wall Street bankers who control the Democratic Party. To reassure the financial elite that he does not pose any threat to their interests, Mamdani has named a right-wing deputy mayor and his transition team is full of establishment Democrats.

Unlike Mamdani, a relative unknown prior to New York’s mayoral election, Hipkins has a substantial record as a government minister and in 2023 he served as prime minister. He led the Labour government to one of the most crushing electoral defeats in its history, amid a profound social crisis and an out-of-control COVID pandemic.

For Hipkins to now call himself a “democratic socialist” is an insult to the intelligence of workers, who have had many years of bitter experience with Labour’s phoney promises to alleviate social inequality and poverty.

When the Labour Party formed a coalition government in October 2017 with the right-wing, anti-immigrant NZ First Party and the Greens, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told an interviewer that capitalism had been a “blatant failure” given that there were “hundreds of thousands of children living in homes without enough to survive.”

The corporate media, as well as pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organisation, falsely portrayed the Ardern government as offering a kinder, gentler version of capitalism. In fact, as the Socialist Equality Group warned from the outset, it was a right-wing government that would impose austerity in health, education and other services, while strengthening New Zealand’s military alliance with US imperialism.

Ardern pledged to end child poverty, properly fund health and education, solve the housing crisis and end homelessness. In all of these areas, however, the crisis significantly worsened between 2017 and 2023.

The number of children living in “material hardship”—in families unable to afford basic necessities such as fresh fruit and vegetables, doctor’s visits and heating—increased from 135,000 in 2017 to 143,700 six years later (about 1 in 8 children).

In his interview with RNZ, Hipkins said that he wanted to restore the “dream of home ownership” for more families. The last Labour government’s Kiwibuild policy, which pledged to build 100,000 “affordable” homes, ended up building just over 2,300 homes by 2024 in collaboration with private developers. These were sold at market

rates, which were out of reach for most working class families.

Homelessness increased under Labour. Between 2018 and 2023, the number of people living in “severe housing deprivation” rose from 99,462 to 112,496 people (2.3 percent of the population).

Speaking to RNZ, Hipkins highlighted out-of-control food prices, saying: “We have the supermarket duopoly controlling a huge proportion of our food supply.” He also pointed to “very, very large profits” being made by the banks and electricity companies, adding that “anyone who is making a large amount of money from monopolistic behaviour should be worried about a future Labour government.”

New Zealand, with a population of just over 5 million, produces enough food for about 40 million people, but large numbers of people can no longer afford basic items. In the past 12 months alone, food prices have gone up 4.7 percent, the price of milk went up 13.5 percent, eggs 18.5 percent and cheese 18.5 percent. Meanwhile wages increased just 2.1 percent in the year to September.

Hipkins outlined no solutions, merely saying that a Labour government would seek to encourage more “competition” to bring down prices. Here again, Labour must be judged on its record.

In November 2020, when food prices were rising at a similar rate, the Ardern government announced a year-long “market study” by the Commerce Commission to determine whether supermarket prices were “fair.” Ardern told the media: “We will act on what they find.” Yet despite the Commission eventually finding that supermarkets were making double what it considered a fair rate of return on capital, the Labour government took no action, even as more and more people struggled to afford food.

In May 2023, the New Zealand Food Network reported that since the pandemic there had been a 165 percent increase in the number of people regularly relying on food banks, which had reached half a million people (one in 10). Government surveys found that the proportion of children living in households “where food runs out sometimes or often” increased from 14.4 percent in 2021/22 to 21.3 percent the following year and 27 percent by 2023/24.

Hipkins played a significant role in imposing the Ardern government’s right-wing agenda. As education minister from 2017 to 2020 he enforced an effective pay freeze, triggering nationwide strikes by primary and secondary teachers in 2019 that were sold out by the union bureaucracy, which pushed through pay deals of about 3 percent per year.

As minister for COVID-19 response in the government’s second term, Hipkins oversaw the dismantling of all restrictions on the spread of the coronavirus, after the government ended its “zero-COVID” policy in 2022 at the behest of big business. He earned the nickname “Let-it-riplekins” on social media, as the government abolished mask mandates and social distancing requirements and suppressed COVID testing to keep infected people at work. Hospitals were overwhelmed with COVID patients and thousands died from the virus.

Hipkins replaced Ardern as prime minister after she resigned in early 2023 as Labour’s support in the polls plummeted. The government moved further to the right under his leadership.

In his RNZ interview, Hipkins blamed NZ First for blocking Labour’s plans to “make our tax system fairer, including the introduction of a capital gains tax (CGT).” In 2023, however, Hipkins ruled out any increase in tax on the wealth hoarded by the country’s billionaires and multi-millionaires. Labour campaigned in the 2023 election on cutting spending and reducing public sector jobs, in order to pay for the debt accumulated by subsidising and bailing out big

businesses during the pandemic.

Labour lost the election by a landslide, its support almost halved from 50 percent in 2020 to 26.9 percent in 2023.

Hipkins is now promising a CGT on property if Labour wins the 2026 election, with the revenue used to fund three doctor’s visits per year for every person in the country. Even if this promise is actually implemented, it would represent a very small increase in tax on the country’s wealthiest layers, who have benefited from decades of speculation in shares and property.

Labour has no differences with the National government’s militarist foreign policy and its close alliance with the US under the fascist Trump regime. Before and after the October 2023 election, Hipkins supported Israel’s genocidal assault on the Gaza Strip, and smeared anti-genocide protesters as anti-semitic.

This year, Hipkins made clear that Labour supports the National-led government’s move to double military spending, which is preparing the country to join a US-led war against China. This is being funded by starving healthcare, education and other vital services.

Workers and young people cannot allow themselves to be duped by Hipkins’ pseudo-populist phrase-mongering, or by the similar statements being made by the Green Party, which propped up the Ardern-Hipkins Labour government and is complicit in its right-wing attacks. All the capitalist parties, as well as the trade union bureaucracy, bear responsibility for imposing the burden of the economic crisis on the working class, while allowing the richest layers of society to accumulate unprecedented wealth.

Those who want to fight against austerity and imperialist war must draw the necessary political lessons from these experiences and act accordingly. The capitalist system cannot be reformed; it is plunging the world towards war, climate catastrophes, mass poverty and fascist barbarism. The current order based on the private ownership of the means of production must be ended and replaced with a socialist system, in which society’s resources are owned and democratically controlled by the working class.

We call on those who agree with this perspective to join the Socialist Equality Group, the only organisation fighting to build a genuine socialist and internationalist party: the New Zealand section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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