

FIRST Union leader speaks at right-wing, anti-immigrant New Zealand First Party convention

Tom Peters
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The right-wing, anti-immigrant New Zealand First Party—a partner in the coalition government led by the National Party, which also includes the libertarian ACT Party—held its annual general meeting in Hamilton on October 12-13.

The widely despised party received just over 6 percent in the 2023 election but wields considerable power: NZ First leader Winston Peters is both foreign minister and deputy prime minister; his deputy Shane Jones is the minister for fisheries, resources and regional development.

NZ First and ACT (which got 8.6 percent in the election) are largely setting the government's agenda, which includes thousands of layoffs across the public sector; reduced funding for school lunches and food banks; cuts to social welfare; drastic underfunding of public hospitals, and tax cuts for wealthy property investors. While imposing brutal austerity measures at home, the government is also boosting military spending to strengthen New Zealand's alliance with US imperialism.

The NZ First gathering was a festival of bigotry, nationalism and militarism.

Jones defended the government's shredding of environmental regulations as part of its pro-business agenda, stating: "before you argue about redistributing wealth or carving up the pie, focus on the generation of the wealth." Peters called for New Zealand to emulate Singapore by offering tax incentives to attract international corporate investment, falsely claiming that this would lead to higher wages.

Featured guest speakers included anti-transgender activist Ro Edge, who railed against transgender athletes' participation in sport, and Australia's right-wing Liberal Party Senator Jacinta Price. The latter emphasised the

military alliance between Australia and New Zealand and called for intensified recruitment into the armed forces to prepare for war. Price named Russia, China, Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah as "threats that are lurking on the horizon of the West."

Price also hailed "the Judeo-Christian foundations" laid in Australia and New Zealand by British colonisation. She echoed NZ First's false and inflammatory claims that indigenous Māori—one of the most oppressed layers of the working class—had received special privileges because of their race.

Perhaps the most significant speaker, however, was Dennis Maga, general secretary of FIRST Union, one of New Zealand's biggest trade unions, with more than 30,000 members across retail, manufacturing, transport, healthcare, finance and other industries.

Maga's appearance underscores the right-wing nationalism of the union bureaucracy, whose role is to enforce the demands of New Zealand capitalism for intensified exploitation of working people. The unions have systematically suppressed opposition to the government's historic attacks on living standards and jobs, and its active support for US imperialism and Israel's genocide of the Palestinians.

A group of pro-Palestine protesters briefly interrupted the NZ First conference to denounce its support for the Netanyahu regime. Maga, however, remained completely silent on the escalating bloodbath in Gaza and the Middle East.

Maga, who was born in the Philippines, sought to lend credibility to the party's pseudo-populist rhetoric. He promoted NZ First's false campaign promise to increase funding for ambulance services, and he absurdly claimed that the party could oppose ACT within the coalition to ensure the government was "governing for New

Zealanders, not powerful corporations.” He pledged that FIRST Union would work with NZ First to “ensure that New Zealand remains a place where workers are valued”—as though the party were not complicit in the brutal onslaught against jobs, public services and living conditions.

Maga whitewashed NZ First’s blatantly xenophobic and racist politics, saying he was “not convinced” that it was “an anti-immigrant party.”

In fact, Peters founded NZ First in 1993 with opposition to Asian immigration—which the party called an “Asian invasion”—at the very centre of its platform. Peters is infamous for demonising Muslim immigrants as “extremists” and terrorists, stating in 2005 that “moderate” groups of Muslims concealed “a serpent underbelly with multiple heads capable of striking at any time and in any direction.”

After the March 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack, in which the fascist Brenton Tarrant killed 51 people at two mosques, Peters defended his 2005 speech. In 2019 and 2020, Jones delivered a series of tirades against Indian immigration, claiming—in a version of the racist “Great Replacement” theory—that they posed “a threat to our identity and status” because they diminished “our percentage [of the population] as M?ori.”

FIRST Union’s Maga, however, told last weekend’s conference: “we commend New Zealand First on their immigration policies,” including restrictions based on income and occupation “to ensure migrants are filling genuine workforce needs.”

The unions have long agitated against immigration in order to divide the working class, scapegoating migrants for overstretched public services, low wages, unemployment, and the worsening housing crisis. FIRST Union, for instance, has repeatedly lobbied against migrants being allowed into New Zealand to drive buses.

While feigning concern about migrant exploitation, Maga argued that immigration was driving down wages and needed to be curbed. He warned that “we are heading back to the time of [former National Party prime minister] John Key, when employers could easily access migrant workers as long as there is a labour market shortage.”

During the 2008?2017 Key government, Labour, NZ First and the M?ori nationalist Mana Party campaigned on the basis of anti-immigrant chauvinism—including a vicious campaign against Chinese migrants owning houses. In 2017, Labour formed a coalition government with NZ First and the Greens, which imposed further restrictions on immigration and strengthened New

Zealand’s military alliance with the United States.

NZ First’s anti-immigrant demagoguery mirrors that of capitalist parties across Europe, the US and Australia—whether openly right-wing or nominally liberal—that are desperately seeking to divert attention from their own responsibility for record levels of poverty and social inequality. The demonisation of foreigners also serves the ideological function of conditioning the population for imperialist wars.

Internationally, trade union leaders are helping to whip up nationalism and even fascism—which is most starkly expressed by Teamsters president Sean O’Brien’s support for Donald Trump’s election campaign in the US.

FIRST Union’s embrace of NZ First must be taken as a warning by the working class: If there is to be a fight against austerity, militarism and attacks on democratic rights, it must be carried out in opposition to the union bureaucracy and the entire political establishment—including Labour and the Greens, which have repeatedly worked with NZ First and adopted its reactionary policies.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers to reject the nationalism, xenophobia and racism spewed out by all the capitalist parties, and to take up the fight for socialism and internationalism.

This includes building new organisations, outside the control of the union bureaucracy: a network of rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves. The task of such committees will be to unite the working class both within New Zealand—where a quarter of the population was born overseas—and internationally. This is the only way to fight against multinational corporations which, with the assistance of the unions, seek to divide workers on the basis of nationality in order to weaken them.



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