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## WHY WE NEED A NEW LEFT WING PARTY

Those of us on the radical left of politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand find ourselves in the middle of 2017 facing yet another general election in which no parliamentary party seriously champions a future which will start to move us beyond capitalism and the legacies of colonisation.

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The glaring organisational gap on the left of New Zealand politics has never been greater or the need to fill it more urgent. When I undertook doctoral research between 2010 and 2013 looking at questions around the need for a major left think tank in New Zealand, the message came through loud and clear that our left activist world was changing.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on analysis of interviews with 51 research participants from diverse parts of the left academic and activist worlds, my thesis concluded that more and more of us were keen to move past weaknesses perceived at the time of research. These included a depleted union movement, a colonised community sector often unable and unwilling to advocate politically for those it served, lack of financial resources, a rightward drift by the Green and Labour Parties and a history of factionalism on the radical left.

A clear call emerged around the need to start building our own new counterhegemonic

institutions capable of changing this country even in the face of the gross power held by the economic and political structures we confront. It was not only think tanks of the left that were urgently needed. Without the concurrent creation and development of a radical left party or parties, we were never going to develop the mass-based ideological and organisational bases necessary if we were to become serious about moving beyond capitalism.

During my research period Mana had been just such a possibility for some of us. Launched in April 2011, Mana was a brave experiment in which radical left Māori invited radical left tauwiwi to become part of a Māori-led, Māori focused political organisation. After joining Mana on the day it launched, I quickly became involved in policy development and stood as a candidate at number four on its party list in the 2011 election. I remained active in the organisation for three years until a national hui

in April 2014 welcomed German billionaire Kim Dotcom into our ranks as an honoured guest speaker. He told us, among other things, that the way forward for the New Zealand economy was through increased foreign investment. The contradiction between Mr Dotcom's lifestyle and philosophy and that of Mana was too extreme for some of us to tolerate, but the vast majority of members decided that Mana and Dotcom's Internet Party should join together to contest the 2014 election.

I quit Mana at that point along with a few others, leaving us party-less pending further developments. For Mana itself the result was an electoral disaster which saw the party lose its sole MP. In February 2017 the Mana and the Māori Parties signed a deal to work together up until the date of the September election, with the Māori Party agreeing to stand aside in Te Tai Tokerau electorate so that Hone Harawira has a better chance of regaining his seat in Parliament.<sup>2</sup> While this agreement makes sense within the world of Māori politics, by its very nature the new formation is unlikely to encourage the participation of large numbers of non-Māori activists in either Mana or the Māori Party. Mr Harawira's call in June 2017 for the execution of Chinese meth dealers only served to emphasise the fragility of Mana's remaining support base and the sometimes awkward relationship with its aspiring Te Tai Tokerau candidate.<sup>3</sup>

When my doctoral research turned to exploring ways in which we might fill two of the glaring gaps in left counterhegemonic institutions, party and think tank, one of the key things to come through was a call for the New Zealand left to become braver. There was a sense that we needed to build unions and community based organisations – and think tanks and parties –

with a more highly developed sense of our own latent power, of our genuine capacity to take our future into our own hands. We would also have a better chance of success if we could establish organisations that value internal debate, that have clear accountable structures, are based on respectful relationships and which also understand that courage and risk taking are essential components of effective activism. These were lessons I sought to actively take forward into real life organisational work from the time I graduated in 2014.

My experience over the past seven years since my detour into the parliamentary arena as a Green MP (1999 – 2009) has not only been in the academy. I have also been deeply involved in the development of Auckland Action Against Poverty (AAAP) and close to the work of FIRST Union and its migrant workers' wing the Union Network of Migrants (UNEMIG). I see in the work of these organisations some of the practical seeds of what we need to learn for any party project.

AAAP was set up in 2010 as an overtly anti-capitalist organisation undertaking both individual Work and Income casework and political advocacy that challenges the neoliberal agenda on jobs, welfare, poverty and housing. At AAAP's 2016 beneficiary 'impact' in Mangere the full force of poverty in this country hit us front on.<sup>4</sup> Despite a huge effort in which we managed to help over 700 people get their full entitlements from Work & Income over a three day period we also had to ask an estimated 800 people to turn around and leave. Some had walked for miles with babies in their arms, slept outside in the carpark waiting, or had driven from Northland or Coromandel to get our help. The worst moment came when a few of us had to turn people away using the same tactics

police use against us on demonstrations. A small number of those at the head of the queue tried to charge through the doors of our community centre base in a desperate bid to get our help. We linked arms and used the force of our bodies to keep them out. This was a heartbreaking moment on a reversed front line. We had promised to help those who came to us. Now we were sending them away with nothing.

A stark lesson we learned from this is that AAAP on its own cannot even begin to cope with the desperate need now present in our communities, through either individual or political advocacy work. Without a political party or parties who can mobilise, amplify and carry a broader counter hegemonic agenda forward, AAAP's efforts will continue to be a drop in an ever-widening ocean of poverty, homelessness, anger and despair. Its focus must be squarely on meeting its own kaupapa the best it can in an environment in which much of the community sector has been rendered toothless by decades of government and corporate colonisation. Activists have often come to work with AAAP because it is one of the only comparatively stable long term bases for action in the region. While this is helpful in boosting the group's volunteer base, it is not viable that AAAP substitute for the much broader opportunities a party or parties would bring for education and conscientisation, strategic action and the building of membership and bases way beyond the natural limits of AAAP's capacity and kaupapa.

On the union side of things FIRST has been experimenting with new ways of strengthening unionism, including through its novel three month organisers' training school in 2015, and through its deliberate organising of actions involving community based activists as well as unionists. An example of this type of action took

place at Bunnings New Lynn in October 2015 when a number of AAAP people locked on across the checkouts, closing access to the store while a major picket raged outside.<sup>5</sup> Community activists are at times able to push militancy beyond the legal and employment constraints affecting union members and organisers. Both FIRST and Unite! unions are taking the lead in developing new ways of working and organising in sectors like supermarkets, big box retail, fast food outlets and call centres, where lowpaid precarious work and hardnosed employers make unionisation and successful bargaining an uphill battle.

For those of us interested in developing new forms of political organisation, these unions have lessons for us about how to work effectively with workers without the patronising approach taken at times by some on the left; about the importance of recognising effective organising as a highly skilled occupation; and about the need to find new ways of operating across old union and community divides at a time when so many workers are constantly moving between paid work and the intimidating intricacies of the welfare system. However, like AAAP, neither FIRST nor Unite! nor any other union or group of unions can substitute for a party or parties. The primary function of unions is to serve the interests of their members in an environment hostile to collective bargaining and to unionisation itself, particularly in the private sector. An effective party could certainly assist unions in their work by providing a site of conscientisation, education and action (and much else) but the two kinds of work cannot substitute one for the other.

In the work of UNEMIG, 'a network of migrant workers within FIRST Union' Dennis Maga and others have for years been taking a brave stand fighting for the rights of some of the most

exploited workers in New Zealand, people who have come here in the hope of a better life only to find themselves underpaid, at times working in dreadful conditions, and in the worst cases surviving in conditions of modern day slavery.<sup>6</sup> This is another cutting-edge site of union struggle in 2017, and a place from which we locals can also learn a lot, if we take the time to listen. A couple of us were in conversation with a migrant worker recently when he asked straight out in a tone of disbelief ‘Where’s your party?’. This worker could not understand why we have no communist or socialist party here. He too was looking for that organisation we have not yet built. That incident highlighted how much we can potentially learn from setting up groups which welcome and involve a diversity of peoples including new migrants, who will at times have more to offer us in terms of political, union and community organising experience than we can begin to imagine. A deeper understanding of the courage, analysis, commitment and organisational capacity required in struggles in the home countries from which many migrants come will only deepen our ability to organise here, despite often vast contextual disparities.

I will return to the question of the party shortly, but first it is perhaps useful to consider the relationship between Economic and Social Research Aotearoa (ESRA) and any party or parties which might develop here in the near future. ESRA is a radical left think tank which is being slowly established by a network of academics and activists around the country in a collective project which grew out of the findings of my doctoral research. ESRA was officially launched in Wellington in September 2016.<sup>7</sup> The new entity aims to build an intellectual armoury for the left, a place of research and knowledge, of dissemination and debate, and a centre for nurturing new thinking and ideas.

The underpinning goal is that ESRA will become an increasingly effective counterhegemonic institution geared to strengthening our organising, policy and academic work across the left. However, ESRA is also very clear that it should not and cannot be a political party. It can never be a think tank’s job to act as the mobilising and organising force which a party must be.

It is also possible that there will be more than one party in the radical left and constitutional transformational space in Aotearoa. I hope there will be. In the early days of Mana I argued with Pākehā friends inside that party that it might be better for we tauiwi to build a sister organisation aligned with Mana and its kaupapa, rather than trying to achieve our goals through one organisation. As history shows I clearly did not win that argument, but I continue to wonder whether in future sister organisations of this nature might be part of the mosaic which develops. There are of course other options for a plurality of parties and I see that it would be ESRA’s place to help provide a thinking and research base for all of them, rather than being aligned with just one. And as a think tank part of ESRA’s role will always be to engage in the widest public political discourse possible, working to shift thinking, policy and future visioning towards a beyond capitalist, beyond colonialist Aotearoa.

Meanwhile, the absence of political organisation anywhere to the left of Labour and the Greens continues. A few of what I call traditional ‘left sect’ organisations continue to valiantly wave the red flag in their various localities. While their commitment and intentions are often admirable, these are not the sort of groups I think we should be building at this historical moment. Like many others who have lived

through eras of intense sectarianism on the New Zealand extra parliamentary left, I have no desire to be part of fomenting a return to endless internecine argument, point scoring and battles for domination in various union and community organisations. The missionary approach, the radical left equivalent of ‘one way Jesus’, does none of us any favours. Many years of organisational practice have taught me that it is far more productive to work with all who can unite around certain fundamental policies and principles, looking for what brings us together rather than that which tears us apart, while accepting that if others wish to work in a different way or hold different beliefs, that’s just fine. It is time to move beyond tightly ideologically confined pre-party or preparatory formations. For those who so choose, our task now is to work towards developing non sectarian and genuinely mass-based peoples’ organisation(s) operating on principles of participatory democracy and seriously committed to making the kinds of structural changes needed to really transform the rotten system of human and ecological exploitation in which we live.

In the 2014 general election, nearly 730,000 of those enrolled to vote did not cast a ballot.<sup>8</sup> For the first time in my life I was one of them. I could not see that any of the three parties of the ‘left’, Labour, Greens and Internet Mana, had any serious intention to begin to move us beyond capitalism and colonialism, especially given the deviant road Mana had taken in its alliance with Kim Dotcom. I totally rejected the notion that it was better to vote for a social democratic party than to cede the field to National. I did not trust that a new Labour-led government would do any better than they have in the past, where often enough the plight of the people whom I have worked with most of my life, unemployed workers, beneficiaries and their families, has

been worsened rather than improved by a victorious Labour government. The Greens still have many good policies and people within their ranks (as do Labour and Mana, for that matter), but have become increasingly a party dedicated to promoting socially and environmentally responsible capitalism. The Labour-Green Budget Responsibility Rules agreement signed in March 2017 was the clearest signal yet that the Green Party now places a business-friendly commitment to fiscal control over any serious intention to legislate for major and effective economic, social and ecological change.<sup>9</sup>

I suggest that the time is ripe for building a new kind of left party in New Zealand. Many of us are aware of this but the task is not easy. As my doctoral research showed, we are conscious of the failures of the past, and often lack confidence in ourselves. But it is time to move past this, and start to actively conceive and build new forms of organisation, now. In this challenge, which I hope we will relish rather than fear, there are at least eight central things I believe we must take into account.

First, any new organisation must be committed to supporting the existing efforts of unions and other organisations demanding change on the streets, encouraging them to do even more and to take the struggle further, without attempting to take them over. Nor can unions and community organisations be conflated with any new party. They can and must remain autonomous of each other, for the sake of both. It has been recently argued that one option for effective new extra parliamentary political organisation in New Zealand may be the Bayan model from the Philippines.<sup>10</sup> While this is interesting to consider, I would contend that our situation is too far removed from that of the Philippines to make this viable, at least for now,

because we lack the existing mass based and multi-sectoral organisations on the ground who could constitute this kind of alliance. Nor does setting up a broad alliance substitute for the absence of a party or parties.

Second, while I believe any party we set up should stand strongly outside the parliamentary process in the beginning and make its priority the building of collective organisation and struggle outside the parliamentary sphere, there should be an option that at the right time it may in future engage in parliamentary elections as well. If we can't give people hope that at some point there may be a chance to build power through parliament rather than by force of arms, we will be making fools of ourselves and of those we hope to win to our cause. In Aotearoa 2017 we must promote an expectation that together we can build organisations capable of taking power without the use of violence or relying on vague notions of revolutionary change which fail to explain how that change might in fact become a reality.

Third, we should become more capable of talking clearly, openly and analytically about these questions of power. It is a reality. So is the state. These are not figments of our imagination and transformational power cannot be magically taken. Some strands of radical left thinking contend that 'the people' will spontaneously rise up when the time is right. It is hard to identify any occasion in history or contemporaneously when this has actually happened. Whether via parliaments or the streets, there are always thinkers and organisers involved, openly or covertly. The right has no qualms about questions of power and uses its vastly superior economic resources and political dominance to make sure the left has as little access to power as

possible. Do we really want to cede all possible futures to them? If we continue to avoid the necessary combativeness involved in driving up and naming the contradictions inherent in capitalism and taking on its structures and systems, then we eliminate forever the possibility of radical change.

Fourth, the language we use is critical. We need to talk in ways that ordinary people can understand. We need to move people with words that relate to their lives and realities in this time and this place. Our efforts will be pointless if we persist – in inappropriate settings – in using political jargon and abstract academic language which alienates and confuses people, or which they simply cannot understand.

Fifth, for tauiwī, relationships with Māori will be vital. Moana Jackson challenged the tauiwī left at the 2016 Social Movements, Resistance and Social Change conference to seriously pick up the tauiwī side of the work for constitutional transformation arising from the extensive Matike Mai consultations and subsequent report.<sup>11</sup> Any new organisation we form must take up this task with sincerity and determination, without expecting Māori friends and allies to do the heavy lifting for us, as has been too often the case in the past.

Sixth, any party we build must be one that working class people see is actually of them, reflects their needs and is not going to sell them out. Building that kind of trust takes time and effort.

Seventh, one of the biggest challenges we face is around the question of leadership. Post-Occupy there has been considerable recognition among young activists that there is a place for

known and accountable leadership rather than a dependence on whoever quietly and without accountability takes such roles. But enabling and effective organisers and leaders don't just magically come into being. These are skilled roles for hard workers who are serious about a lifelong commitment to struggle. We need to become more conscious of actively bringing more people into skilled leadership, and more willing to have conversations about the nature and qualities of leadership without belittling or berating each other in the process.

Eighth, there is also the associated question of populism. On both left and right of the political spectrum internationally populism is being touted as the way forward, and in some cases has been remarkably successful, catastrophically so in the case of Trump. But I would urge caution before we start looking too urgently for our New Zealand Jeremy Corbyn, Bernie Sanders or Pablo Iglesias as some have urged over the past year. The one-man hero may be a short cut to mass mobilisation but surely we can find here in Aotearoa a different way – leadership which is shared, operates from an enabling rather than hierarchical foundation, and which involves more than one person and one gender.

We must build organisations for change that are sustainable long term and that are unafraid of taking power. This means beginning the slow, hard work of creating new institutions where nothing has existed before. As we come to truly understand the gravity and extent of the task in front of us, some of us may become a little anxious. It is easy at such a point to revert to old tactics such as entryism into social democratic parties or to sink back into the kind of small vanguard sect type party to which most of us have no intention of returning. We need to do everything we can to avoid falling yet again into these traps, especially given the unavoidable pressures an election year brings.

We are well advised to keep our eyes on a much longer term horizon. We must build a new kind of party, one that has not been seen in this country for a long time, if ever, capable of mobilising people and resources on a scale that can achieve a future far better than the one capital has mapped out for us and our children. To do this well will require bravery on all our parts, and a huge amount of sensitivity and care as well. It is important that we refrain from telling ourselves the task is too difficult. We can do it, and our time is now.

# NOTES

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