

New Zealand opposition parties seize on “illegal” fishing to promote militarism

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On January 12 the New Zealand navy patrol boat HMNZS Wellington intercepted three vessels—the Kunkun, the Songhua and the Yongding—which it allegedly observed fishing illegally in the Southern Ocean. The boats were reportedly catching toothfish, a lucrative species sold in up-market restaurants in Asia and the US.

For three days the Wellington faced off against the vessels, which are flagged to Equatorial Guinea, but was unable to board them because the captains took evasive action. The patrol boat eventually returned to New Zealand to refuel.

This relatively minor incident provoked a storm of controversy in New Zealand. Opposition politicians portrayed the three unarmed boats in international waters as a national security threat. They condemned the navy’s failure to halt them and used the episode to whip up nationalism and militarism.

The National Party government said it would take legal action against the vessels, which it believes to be linked to the Spanish fishing syndicate, Vidal Armadores. Foreign Minister Murray McCully told Radio NZ the boats were “really serious crooks and we’re going to throw the book at them.”

The right-wing populist NZ First Party’s defence spokesman Ron Mark denounced the government’s “pacifist” response and called for the Wellington to fire warning shots at fishing boats. In an inflammatory statement, Mark declared: “Should these vessels refuse boarding then we must be prepared to use force. Wellington is meant to be a warship after all ... [H]ow we deal with this right now will dictate the future so we need to stop being so squirmish and take the gloves off. If we bottle this then it’ll be open season on our resources.”

The Labour Party echoed NZ First. Labour’s defence

spokesman Phil Goff declared on Tuesday: “We send New Zealand naval vessels to the Arabian Gulf to board pirate ships there, but seem to lack the ability to detain pirate fishing boats in our own back yard.” He demanded that the government explain “why our navy is unable to carry out its task of effectively policing maritime areas for which we have responsibility.”

In Australia, Greens Party Senator Peter Whish-Wilson demanded that Canberra send more patrol boats into the Southern Ocean. “We’ve obviously got a revolving door of illegal fishing going on in the Southern Ocean and the kind of fine that we’re talking about here [if the boat owners are prosecuted] is really just a slap on the wrist,” he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

The environmentalist outfit, Sea Shepherd, which is known for its aggressive tactics against Japanese whaling ships, also called for a stronger naval presence. Its spokesman Paul Watson told Fairfax Media the NZ navy’s operation was “a pathetic and cowardly failed intervention.”

The assertions, repeated uncritically in the media, that the Kunkun, the Songhua and the Yongding were illegally fishing in the Southern Ocean, are highly dubious. Far from being in New Zealand’s “back yard,” the boats were well outside NZ’s declared exclusive economic zone. According to Interpol, the NZ navy’s attempt to board the vessels took place in Antarctic waters claimed by Australia. Seven countries—Australia, New Zealand, Britain, France, Norway, Chile and Argentina—claim sovereignty over large portions of Antarctica and the Southern Ocean, but most other countries do not recognise these claims.

The 1980 Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources established a commission to regulate fisheries in the Southern Ocean.

But the Convention only applies to its members—24 countries plus the European Union—and 11 other countries that have acceded to the Convention. These do not include Equatorial Guinea.

New Zealand is in no position to lecture anyone on allegedly illegal practices in the fishing industry. Labour and National-led governments have allowed fishing companies to charter unsafe vessels operated by crews mainly from Indonesia who are subject to exploitative and brutal conditions.

The reaction of NZ First, Labour and the Australian Greens to the confrontation in the Southern Ocean can only be understood in its broader context. The statements by Goff, Mark and Whish-Wilson make clear that, using concerns about over-fishing as a pretext, the parties want to strengthen their navies' ability to control vast stretches in the Southern Ocean beyond Australian and New Zealand territorial waters.

Driven by the increasingly severe global economic crisis, every corner of the globe, including the Arctic and Antarctic, is becoming the focus of geo-political rivalry. Highly profitable resources are at stake, including fish and oil. NZ's biggest fishing company Sanford currently fishes in Antarctic waters for toothfish. Australian and NZ corporations are determined to stave off competitors, particularly from China and other Asian countries.

At the same time, the calls for a better-equipped and more aggressive naval presence are bound up with New Zealand's integration into Washington's war plans. The Obama administration has dramatically escalated tensions in Asia and the Pacific with its military encirclement of China, which is aimed at ensuring US dominance in the region. Like other countries, NZ is being drawn into this dangerous confrontation.

The National government fully supports US imperialism and has promised to send troops to the renewed war in Iraq. It has also stepped up New Zealand's participation in US-led military exercises and hosted US troops in large-scale exercises. However, National has been reluctant to openly endorse the military build-up against China, as the Australian government has done. NZ's economy relies heavily on exports to China, the country's number one trading partner.

Labour and its allies—NZ First, the Greens and the Maori nationalist Mana Party—favour a more explicit

alignment with Washington against Beijing. They have repeatedly attacked the government's business ties with China. In the lead-up to the September 2014 election, Labour and Mana joined NZ First in attacking Chinese investment. They also scapegoated immigrants, who are largely from China, for unemployment, the housing shortage and other aspects of country's social crisis.

NZ First, a virulently anti-Asian party, is being promoted by Labour and its supporters, including the trade union bureaucracy, as part of the shift of official politics further to the right. Last October, the *Daily Blog*, which is funded by four trade unions, gave a regular column to NZ First member Curwen Ares Rolinson.

On January 15, Rolinson published a sabre-rattling rant on the blog calling on the navy to seize the "illegal" fishing boats "at cannon-point." He demanded that the government "strengthen and properly resource our Defence Force." Rolinson added: "We are no longer living in ... a 'benign strategic environment'; and it's high time that our elected leaders acknowledged that uncomfortable fact and supported the Forces accordingly."

His comments point to the real motivations behind furore over the fishing vessels. It provides a convenient pretext for a military build-up by New Zealand and Australia, in league with the United States, and highlights the fact that the vast Southern Ocean not only has economic resources, but could be strategically significant in future wars.



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