

Protests in New Zealand against Trans Pacific Partnership

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Last Saturday thousands of people joined nationwide rallies in New Zealand against the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, which is being negotiated by 12 Pacific Rim countries, including New Zealand and the US.

The protests took place in 22 cities and regional centres. The “National Day of Action” against the secretive negotiations was the fifth such event to be held in the past year and followed demonstrations in 2012 and 2013. National Party Prime Minister John Key has indicated a TPP deal, which has been repeatedly delayed, could be signed by mid-year.

In Auckland 3,000 people marched down Queen Street with a mock Trojan horse symbolising, according to organisers, that “elite US corporations” are “pulling the strings behind the scenes” on the TPP. Over 1,000 people marched through the Wellington CBD to parliament while 3,000 participated in Christchurch and 1,500 in Dunedin.

The Obama administration is aggressively pushing the TPP as a weapon for dictating economic and trading terms to countries throughout the Asia-Pacific. The grouping began in 2005 with an agreement between Brunei, Chile, New Zealand and Singapore to manage trade and integrate their economies. After Washington joined the group in 2011, negotiations were expanded to cover Australia, Brunei, Chile, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the US and Vietnam.

The TPP has become the economic front in Washington’s confrontational “pivot to Asia,” mirroring the rapidly intensifying US military build-up throughout the region aimed at China. At the Asia Pacific Economic (APEC) summit in Beijing last November, Obama called a special meeting of TPP participants to steer the conference to isolate and

undercut China and establish the TPP as “the model for trade in the 21st century.”

The TPP is a mechanism through which Wall Street SEEKS to open up economies in the Asia Pacific for American trade and investors. The US is pressing in particular the dismantling of national regulatory measures, including those favouring state-owned enterprises, and the protection of the “intellectual property rights” of American corporations in areas such as software, media and pharmaceuticals. Governments that fail to comply could face multi-million dollar lawsuits or exclusion from the US market.

Key sections of New Zealand capital are also seeking to benefit. The finance sector, which dominates the country’s economy, wants more financial deregulation. The dairy industry is also pressing for freer access to the US market while fighting off new restrictions on access into China. In joining the TPP, New Zealand, like every other country in the region, is forced to balance its trade relationship with China against its long-standing strategic alliance with the US.

The recent protests have tapped into widespread concern over the potential impact of the TPP. An open letter to the government from 260 health practitioners last May warned that any attempt to regulate the activities of businesses that affect community health, such as the advertising and sale of tobacco or alcohol, will be over-ridden by the TPP. Higher costs for medicines are forecast as pharmaceutical companies oppose national programs that regulate prices.

Underlying this relentless drive for pro-market restructuring is the deepening crisis of global capitalism. However, far from challenging in any way the profit system, the organisers of the anti-TPP campaign in New Zealand seek to divert opposition into reactionary nationalist channels.

The protests have been co-ordinated by the well-funded “It’s Our Future New Zealand” organisation, an umbrella for an assortment of trade unions, academics, Greens, and the Maori nationalist Mana Party—all dedicated to the defence of capitalism.

Chairing Wellington rally last Saturday, Sandra Grey, the Tertiary Education Union president, declared that the TPP would place a straitjacket over “our ability to make the laws that govern us,” and said the government should be “ashamed of itself” for giving away “our sovereignty.” Grey called on protesters to fight the agreement “in any way we can,” including by petitioning parliament and local authorities.

In a statement, Green Party MP James Shaw demagogically declared that “National’s TPP deal will make us second class citizens in our own country by ceding sovereignty over policy decisions to big businesses.” Mana member John Minto similarly told TV1 that the deal was “not in New Zealand’s interests,” but those of “US corporations to come and plunder the New Zealand economy.”

Big business, however, already dictates the country’s policies and has always done so. These politicians and their servants in the trade unions and the pseudo-left outfits merely represent sections of New Zealand business which fear that international competition through the TPP will cut across their own interests.

Maori-owned companies represented by Mana have significant stakes in tourism, forestry, fishing and agriculture, and are adamantly opposed to any “foreign” threats to their profits.

Mana, which is supported by the pseudo-left groups Fightback, Socialist Aotearoa and the International Socialist Organisation, calls for “withdrawal from free trade agreements that favour multinationals over local production or prevent support for locally owned businesses.” Like the racist New Zealand First Party, Mana advocates a ban on foreigners buying houses and discrimination against migrant workers.

NZ First MP Fletcher Tabuteau, who was invited to address a rally in Rotorua last November and in Wellington on Saturday, declared that “New Zealanders must rule our country, not foreign businesses.”

Since 2012, the Greens and Mana, along with Labour and the anti-immigrant NZ First Party, have also been involved in protests against investment from China.

This chauvinist anti-Chinese campaign happens to dovetail with US efforts to incorporate New Zealand more fully into its “pivot to Asia,” including intelligence and military cooperation.

Other sections of New Zealand business, including the ICT and high-end manufacturers, have also expressed reservations over the TPP. Prominent investment banker and multi-millionaire Gareth Morgan, an advocate of “free trade,” criticises provisions which would “stop our government being able to legislate for the public good if that hurts an international business interest.”

The TPP is part of the relentless drive to impose the burden of the global capitalist breakdown on working people. All sections of the New Zealand capitalist class—both those for and against the TPP—support the austerity measures that destroy the jobs and living standards of workers and youth. The working class can only defend its interests through a unified international struggle against the profit system to establish a world planned socialist economy. This requires the rejection of all forms of nationalism and chauvinism.



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