

New Zealand: Thousands protest Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement

Our reporters
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More than 25,000 people marched in New Zealand on Saturday in protest against the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement. The rallies, in 21 cities and towns, were three times as large as anti-TPP protests in March, indicating growing opposition to austerity, big business and the machinations of the political elite. More than 10,000 turned out in Auckland, 5,000 in the capital Wellington and 4,000 in Christchurch.

The protests were the culmination of a “week of action” under the slogan “TPPA-Walk Away!” aimed at pressuring the National Party government to withdraw from the talks. Trade ministers from 12 nations are negotiating the trade bloc, which will encircle the Pacific from Japan to Chile and cover 40 percent of the world’s economy. Talks stalled earlier this month amid continuing sharp divisions, including New Zealand digging in over dairy access, and Japan and the US at loggerheads over auto.

New Zealand’s government is a fervent advocate of the TPP. However, according to the *New Zealand Herald* last Saturday, Trade Minister Tim Groser says he is coming under “intense pressure” from other governments, who want to conclude the deal quickly, to cave in on New Zealand’s demands for better access for dairy exports to the heavily-protected markets of Japan, Canada and the United States.

Presented as a “free-trade” deal, the TPP is in fact the economic arm of the US “pivot to Asia” directed against China, which has been effectively excluded from the treaty. The pact is being negotiated behind closed doors, in close consultation with US conglomerates and other transnational corporations.

The US is pressing for the dismantling of national regulatory measures, including those favouring state-owned enterprises, and the protection of the

“intellectual property rights” of American corporations in key areas such as software, media and pharmaceuticals. Governments that fail to comply could face multi-million dollar lawsuits or exclusion from the US market.

Tensions around the talks were highlighted with the release of an unprecedented statement by the US State Department on Friday, warning any US citizens in Auckland against the TPP protests and advising them to stay away. In an email, the US Consulate General in Auckland urged US citizens to avoid the march as “even demonstrations intended to be peaceful can turn confrontational.”

Anti-TPP protests have grown in New Zealand over the past three years, attracting diverse social layers. In conditions where the entire political establishment supports the imposition of the financial elite’s austerity agenda, the protests have become a vehicle for generalised political and social discontent.

Banners on the marches focus on numerous issues, including access to health care, the power and greed of global corporations, the rise of “charter schools” and global warming. A particular concern is state secrecy and the government’s refusal to release the text of the TPP agreement.

However, far from challenging Washington’s build-up to war against China and the drive for pro-market restructuring, rooted in the deepening global crisis of capitalism, the organisers of the anti-TPP campaign are working overtime to divert opposition into reactionary nationalist and protectionist channels. The TPP, they argue, threatens New Zealand’s “sovereignty” and right to “make its own laws.”

The protests have been co-ordinated by the “It’s Our Future New Zealand” organisation, an umbrella for various trade unions, academics, the Greens and the

Maori nationalist Mana Party. It represents a privileged middle-class layer, local businesses and the Maori elite, who regard the TPP as a threat to their own economic interests. At the Auckland rally, a major theme of the speeches was that the TPP would undermine the Treaty of Waitangi, which is a state-sponsored mechanism for handing over millions of dollars to Maori tribal businesses.

A significant political presence at the rally was the Maori Party, which is a minor coalition partner in the National-led government and supports its anti-working class austerity agenda. Maori Party co-leader Marama Fox had the gall to posture as a supporter of the poor, and declared that Maori “know what it’s like” to have their “sovereignty stripped away.”

The meaning of the demand for Maori “sovereignty” is spelled out by the Mana Party, which split from the Maori Party in 2011 but has the same pro-capitalist program. Mana’s web site demands withdrawal from free trade agreements “that favour multinationals over local production or prevent support for locally owned businesses.”

Todd Rippon, vice-president of Actors Equity, told the Wellington rally that only one locally produced drama is screening on the three main television channels. According to Rippon, a 1994 World Trade Organisation deal made it illegal for New Zealand to impose local content quotas, except for “indigenous” broadcasting. Rippon vehemently advocated such protectionist measures, saying that local performers “know what it feels like to be cast aside for extremely rich US corporations.” Rippon insisted that local content is vital to promote “national identity, sense of self and pride,” and the TPP threatened “tiny, beautiful and vulnerable” New Zealand.

Significantly, documentary film maker Bryan Bruce made the only reference to war—glorifying the country’s involvement in World War I as a struggle for “democracy” and the “right for us to make our own laws in our own land,” which was carried through by the “force of arms.” In fact, New Zealand’s participation in the carnage of World War I was in defence of the British Empire and resulted in the deaths of more than 18,000 young men.

Not one of the speakers in Auckland or Wellington mentioned the role of the TPP in the Obama administration’s preparations for war against China.

They also remained silent on the moves to integrate the New Zealand military and intelligence agencies into the anti-China “pivot.” This is no accident. The nationalist perspective of the “It’s Our Future” campaign depicts New Zealand, not as a minor imperialist power with its own ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region, but as a colonial outpost under the domination of “foreign” masters.

A number of the organisations active in the TPP protests are aggressively promoting anti-Chinese xenophobia in order to divert deepening social discontent into reactionary channels. Since 2012, the Greens and Mana, along with Labour and the anti-immigrant NZ First Party, have been involved in protests against investment from China. This campaign dovetails with US efforts to incorporate New Zealand more fully into the drive to war.

Wrapping up the Wellington rally, Sandra Grey, the Tertiary Education Union president, underlined the bankrupt perspective of the protests. Having made numerous demagogic calls for “democracy,” Grey pointed to the parliamentary buildings and declared: “This is our parliament, and they will listen.”

In fact, the TPP is part of the relentless drive to war and the imposition of the burden of the global capitalist breakdown on working people. The working class can defend its interests only through a unified international struggle against the profit system and all its agencies to establish a world-planned socialist economy. This requires the rejection of all forms of nationalism and chauvinism, and the unification of workers around the world against imperialism and war.



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