

New Zealand: Anti-TPP protests promote Maori nationalism

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The signing of the Trans-Pacific Partnership in New Zealand last month was met with some of the largest protests in recent years. The march in Auckland attracted 20,000 people, reflecting widespread opposition in the working class to a deal that will strengthen multinational corporations at the expense of jobs, working conditions and the environment, and drive up the cost of medicines.

The TPP, an agreement of 12 countries led by the US, aims to cement Washington's control over the Asia-Pacific region's economy and roll back China's influence. As President Barack Obama said following the signing: "TPP allows America—and not countries like China—to write the rules of the road in the 21st century." It is the economic front of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" which also involves a huge US military expansion throughout the region in preparation for war with China.

The organisers of the anti-TPP protests, however, support New Zealand's alliance with US imperialism and its military build-up against China. They include the opposition Labour Party, the Greens, the anti-immigrant New Zealand First, the Council of Trade Unions and the two Maori nationalist parties—Mana and the Maori Party. These parties oppose the TPP, or aspects of it, because they fear it will weaken less competitive sections of New Zealand business, which favour protectionist policies.

The previous Labour government cemented military and intelligence ties with the US by participating in the illegal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Far from opposing the build-up to war, Mana recently joined the Labour Party and New Zealand First in a xenophobic campaign scapegoating Chinese immigrants and investors for New Zealand's social crisis that only assists in creating the climate for war.

These parties and their pseudo-left supporters have remained silent on the growing threat of war between two nuclear-armed powers, deliberately keeping workers in the dark. They have sought, above all, to prevent the protests against the TPP from becoming part of a broader movement of the working class against war and austerity.

Instead, the protest organisers heavily promoted Maori nationalism, a pervasive form of identity politics used to divide the working class along racial lines and shackle Maori workers

to their "own" capitalist class. Speakers from Labour, the Greens and Mana joined the right-wing Maori Party, which is part of the ruling coalition, in denouncing the TPP as both an attack on New Zealand's national "sovereignty" and on Maori rights under the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi.

Labour Party MP Grant Robertson declared he was "disgusted by the National government's decision to sign this agreement two days before we celebrate Waitangi Day," the national holiday that commemorates the signing of the Treaty by the British Empire and Maori tribal chiefs. He attacked the government for not consulting tribal leaders during TPP negotiations. The opposition parties all denounced Prime Minister John Key for refusing to attend official Waitangi Day commemorations hosted by the Ngapuhi tribe, which opposes the TPP.

The Treaty of Waitangi and Waitangi Day have assumed a quasi-religious status under successive governments as a symbol of "national identity" based on a supposed "partnership" between the European and Maori races. The media and political establishment's obsessive focus on Waitangi is aimed at making "race relations" the axis of official politics and cultural life, and preventing workers of all races from uniting against their shared class oppression.

The promotion of the treaty as "progressive" is a sham. The document facilitated Britain's conquest of the country with the false promise that Maori land would be protected. For most of the 20th century, the treaty was widely regarded as a confidence trick, one of many perpetrated by British imperialism throughout the world.

Since the 1980s, however, the treaty has been embraced by the ruling class as a founding national document, placing it at the centre of New Zealand nationalism. The Waitangi Tribunal, established in 1975, ostensibly to provide redress for the crimes of colonialism, began making multi-million dollar payments to Maori tribes in the early 1990s, transforming them into profitable capitalist businesses.

During this period, Labour and National governments carried out historic attacks on the working class, gutting and privatising social services, slashing corporate taxes and overseeing mass redundancies. The Waitangi Tribunal became the mechanism to elevate a handful of Maori tribal leaders and entrepreneurs into

the ranks of the capitalist elite. A well-off middle class layer of lawyers, state bureaucrats and politicians has also been cultivated to act as a buffer against the Maori working class, which gained nothing from the settlements and remains one of the most oppressed sections of the working class.

This elite layer is represented in government by the Maori Party, and in opposition by the Mana Party. Both parties use the slogan of “Maori sovereignty” to demand a greater portion for Maori capitalists of the surplus value extracted from the working class as a whole.

In an attempt to appease the Maori Party, the National government negotiated the insertion of a clause in the TPP (Article 29.6) allowing New Zealand to adopt measures giving “more favourable treatment to Maori” in matters covered by the agreement, in order to fulfil its “obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi.”

According to the Mana and Maori Parties, however, this clause is too vague and does not guarantee that Maori business interests will be protected. Maori Party co-leader Marama Fox complained that it “leaves it up to the government of the day to interpret our treaty rights.”

A Maori Party spokesman at the Wellington rally on February 4 called for “measures to strengthen the status” of the treaty, such as “an upper treaty house in parliament, [and] a parliamentary commissioner for the treaty.”

Mana leader Hone Harawira, who was a member of the Maori Party until 2011, has made similar statements. He told Maori Television on February 1: “We must get rid of [Prime Minister John Key] and create a Maori government and a Maori parliament that will rid us of this deal that is no good for this country or its people.”

The Maori Party’s opposition to the TPP is its first major dispute with the National Party government. For eight years it has loyally supported National’s anti-working class policies of austerity and privatisation. In exchange, the government has boosted treaty settlement payments and created opportunities for Maori businesses to profit from privately-run charter schools, the sale of state-owned housing, and the privatisation of health and welfare services under the Whanau Ora scheme.

As a result, since the eruption of the 2008 global financial crisis, the wealth of the tribal elite has soared, while the working class has been hit by thousands of redundancies and other attacks on living standards.

The Auckland-based Ngati Whatua Orakei (NWO), which has been hailed by the Mana Party for supporting the anti-TPP protests, is a case in point.

The value of NWO’s assets nearly doubled from \$400 million in 2010 to \$767 million in 2015—helped by an \$18 million government payment in 2011. The *New Zealand Herald* recently reported that the tribe’s commercial arm “has big cashflow from occupants of its Quay Park land holdings, including Vector Arena, the three Scene apartment blocks and the Countdown supermarket and rent from the Aecom House

office block.”

NWO purports to invest its profits in “affordable” housing, for instance at the Kainga Tuatahi Housing Project on land purchased from the government in 1996. In fact, according to the *Herald*, 12 state houses were demolished to make way for the project. The tribe has begun to sell newly built houses, each priced at under \$550,000, to meet the government’s absurd definition of “affordable.”

The coming together of Mana with the Maori Party against the TPP exposes, once again, the fraudulent character of Mana’s claims to be “left wing.” The pseudo-left groups—Fightback, the International Socialist Organisation (ISO) and Socialist Aotearoa—joined Mana and campaigned for it in the 2011 and 2014 elections, falsely claiming it was “pro-poor” and even “anti-capitalist.”

The ISO published four articles on last month’s protests, none of which mentioned the TPP’s role in Washington’s war preparations against China. The group instead echoed the bourgeois parties, stating that the TPP would undermine “the government’s requirement to honour the treaty [of Waitangi].” A February 16 article attacked the government’s multi-million dollar payments to Maori tribes as “paltry,” effectively calling for larger settlements.

The ISO also complained that the TPP could imperil a claim lodged with the Waitangi Tribunal by six tribes (known as the Wai 262 claim) aimed at establishing private property rights over native New Zealand flora and fauna, and intellectual property rights over a range of traditional Maori cultural practices.

The ISO’s support for this grasping Maori elite underscores its hostility to the working class. Like the other pseudo-left organisations, the ISO represents the interests of affluent sections of the middle class—including academics, trade union bureaucrats, entrepreneurs and bourgeois party hacks. The race-based identity politics promoted by Mana and the pseudo-lefts has nothing to do with socialism, but is one of the political levers used by this layer to improve their lot under capitalism.

A genuine struggle against the TPP and thus against war and austerity can be waged only on an internationalist and socialist basis, unifying workers to put an end to their common source of oppression—the profit system. That requires a complete break with all forms of nationalism and identity politics, including Maori nationalism, that seek to divide workers and subordinate them to sections of the ruling class.



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