

# The way forward after the PNG police shootings

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The shooting of unarmed student protesters on June 8 by police in Papua New Guinea raises critical political questions for workers and youth, not only in PNG but throughout the region and internationally. Confronted by a deepening economic and social crisis, the government of Prime Minister Peter O'Neill is determined to intimidate and suppress any opposition to its continued rule and its policies.

Student leaders and opposition parties focussed weeks of protests preceding the police crackdown on government corruption and the demand for O'Neill's removal. The issue, however, is not corruption as such, which is rife throughout the country's venal ruling elites manoeuvring for next year's election. Opposition leader Don Polye was O'Neill's treasurer until 2014 and is fully committed to the austerity measures being implemented by the government.

The crucial question facing young people, workers and the rural poor is how to oppose the ruinous attacks on their living standards that have been carried out by successive governments. The collapse of global commodities prices has had a devastating impact on the PNG economy, with the growth rate plunging from 13.3 percent in 2014 to a forecast 2.4 percent in 2017. In response to falling revenues, the government has slashed spending, resulting in public servants not being paid and cuts to the health and education budgets of 40 percent and 23 percent respectively.

These austerity measures will compound the social crisis facing the working class and rural poor. According to Oxfam, 37 percent of the population already lives on less than \$US1.25 a day. Malaria and HIV/AIDS are rife due to the lack of health facilities and programs. More than 60 percent of the population has no access to safe drinking water. Illiteracy is widespread, particularly among women.

None of these huge social problems will be addressed, let alone resolved, simply by replacing O'Neill with another representative of the PNG ruling class. The root cause of the social hardships facing millions is the profit system and the domination of the PNG economy by global banks and corporations, particularly the mining giants. Billions of dollars in profits are extracted from PNG by these international operations but no money is available for much-needed social and physical infrastructure.

Moreover, as the global capitalist crisis worsens, PNG, like every country in the Asia Pacific, is being drawn into the maelstrom of geo-political rivalries fuelled by the US "pivot to Asia" and military preparations for war against China. O'Neill was installed in 2011, with the backing of Australia, through a series of unconstitutional moves to oust Michael Somare, who was viewed as too close to China.

Australia has long regarded its former colony PNG as part of its immediate backyard. Now, however, amid an accelerating US-led military build-up throughout the region, Canberra and Washington are determined to undermine and block Chinese influence in the south west Pacific. Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper emphasised that "the security, stability and cohesion of Papua New Guinea" was vital for a "secure resilient Australia with secure northern approaches."

Young people who have been involved in the anti-government protests need to turn to a fundamentally different political strategy from that which has guided the opposition movement so far. The struggle for basic democratic rights, and against austerity and war, can be based only on the fight for socialism and internationalism. Leon Trotsky outlined the central elements of this perspective more than a century ago in

his Theory of Permanent Revolution, which placed the political independence of the working class at the centre. It was confirmed in the course of the Russian Revolution of 1917, which established the first workers' state.

The entire history of the 20th century has demonstrated the inability of the capitalist classes in countries of a belated capitalist development, such as PNG, to meet the basic social needs and democratic aspirations of the vast majority of the population. In the four decades since formal independence from Australian colonial rule, the social position of working people has dramatically deteriorated as successive governments have carried out the dictates of big business and the fractured ruling elites have squabbled over the crumbs from the table of the giant mining corporations and other global investors.

Students and young people need to turn to the working class, the only social force that is capable of waging a consistent political fight for basic democratic and social rights. It is through the mobilisation of workers, independent of all factions of the ruling class, that layers of the rural poor can be drawn into the struggle for a workers' government, supported by the millions of villagers who depend on semi-subsistence agriculture. Such a government will begin to refashion society on a socialist basis to meet the pressing needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few.

By its very nature, such a struggle must be international in scope. From the outset, it will confront the determined opposition not only of the government in Port Moresby but the corporations and major powers, especially Australian imperialism, which has already carried out military interventions in East Timor and the Solomons to protect its corporate and strategic interests. Australian Federal Police "advisers" are currently embedded in the PNG police force that gunned down students last week.

Thus the fight for socialism is inconceivable without a turn to the working class throughout the Pacific Island states, in neighbouring Indonesia and Asia, in the imperialist centres of Australia and the United States, and around the world. Above all, this requires the building of new revolutionary leaderships of the working class in PNG and throughout the region as sections of the international Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International

(ICFI).

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is standing in the Australian federal election to advance the struggle to unify the working class in the Asia Pacific and internationally in a common struggle against war and austerity through the abolition of capitalism. The SEP is the only party that has consistently opposed the predatory interventions of Australian imperialism in the Pacific. We stand ready to offer every political assistance to individuals and groups in PNG and other countries of the region who want to begin the task of assimilating the political lessons of the struggles of the Trotskyist movement and building new sections of the ICFI.



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