

Papua New Guinea student leaders invoke “reconciliation” to shut down protests

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The Student Representative Council (SRC) at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) is collaborating with the university administration to institute a “reconciliation” process to shut down student protests and engineer a return to class. The SRC wrote to the administration this week asking for a meeting to negotiate an end to the present standoff.

SRC spokesperson Gerald Tulu Manu Peni told Radio New Zealand on Wednesday that “students”—that is, the SRC—were prepared to “apologise” if the administration did likewise and condemned the actions of police who opened fire on protesting students on June 8.

The students were shot while preparing to march to the parliament in support of a no-confidence vote by the official opposition against Prime Minister Peter O’Neill over corruption allegations. The university blamed the students, saying the shootings resulted from them “not heeding the administration’s advice.”

Classes were suspended indefinitely on May 20 after police occupied UPNG’s two campuses to suppress widening protests. Classes were scheduled to resume on June 14. Following the shooting, the students declared they were in “mourning” and would not return until two wounded colleagues recovered.

Fresh clashes erupted on Thursday between a group of students and Uniforce, the campus security. One student, Henry Norrie-Maim, said the violence broke out after guards tried to enforce a return to class. “Uniforce tried to use force, using flares to chase the students out, but that brought back the frustration from two weeks ago,” he said. The library was stoned and Uniforce cars torched.

In what students described as a “spillover” from that confrontation, a UPNG building was set on fire Friday morning. Police re-occupied the campus and staff were

turned away. Student representative Samuel Apa told ABC Radio that students would keep demonstrating “until there is a genuine reconciliation process.”

“Reconciliation” is a fraud. Students across PNG have waged a determined struggle over a nearly two-month period in the face of escalating government intimidation and state violence. The SRC’s perspective—aligning with the opposition parties and focussing protests on limited, and failed, appeals for O’Neill’s removal—has brought the movement, at this point, to a dead-end.

The resumption of classes is being organised by student councils in collaboration with the political establishment and state apparatus. After noting that the disruptions will cost the government “millions of kina” (PNG’s currency), the government’s chief secretary Isaac Lupari met with university administrators then called on “parents, civil societies and political leaders” to ensure that students return.

The Catholic Bishops Conference offered to facilitate “reconciliation in the Melanesian way” between the students, the UPNG administration, police and the government. A negotiating group, comprising NGO representatives, church leaders and “prominent statesmen,” including former Prime Minister Michael Somare, is to “mediate” between the students and the university.

UPNG acting chancellor Dr Nicholas Mann said students had to return to classes “for the sake of their own future.” After June 25, Mann warned, the first semester would no longer be “viable.” Mann told the *National* that some classes at the science and medical schools had resumed last Monday but the majority of students were yet to return.

Another student leader, Hercules Jim, told Radio NZ that many students who had been “traumatised” by the

shooting were still back in their home villages. “We want to go back to class,” he said, but could not do so under the present circumstances. “We have been sacrificing our lives as future leaders of this nation for a cause we believe in,” Lin said, and “should not be taken lightly by the university and the government.”

Asked by ABC Radio if any students would be penalised over the protests, Mann replied they would if found to have broken the law, or if the SRC’s statutes had been breached. He declared that students would also be “answerable” under the UPNG’s student conduct agreement.

The SRC took a case to the National Court attempting to nullify “reaffirmation” forms that students were forced to sign. Spokesman Manu Peni said the form, which states that anyone involved in unrest or boycotts can be “expelled on the spot,” denied students their right to protest. The court declared it is not satisfied that the human rights of students were being breached.

The *National* made a pitch to students eyeing careers in the state apparatus. On June 16, it reminded “the current crop of student activists” that the existing PNG political leaders, bureaucrats and business people were themselves “starry-eyed young people during their university days,” shouting anti-government slogans. “Perhaps, after having made your point, would it be advisable to now stand back and learn all you can,” it counselled.

Students are returning at the University of Technology in Lae where classes had also been suspended for nearly two months. Fights erupted last week after a forum hosted by the administration and SRC attempted to end the boycott. The SRC had signed an agreement committing to an immediate resumption of classes. Vice Chancellor Albert Schram said there are still some students who wanted to maintain the boycott “at any cost.” Security personnel and police were on hand “just in case somebody wants to stir up trouble.”

The University of Goroka’s campus remains deserted after the governing council imposed a two-week break following clashes between opposing groups of students.

Amid a precipitous economic collapse and harsh austerity measures, the PNG political establishment is deeply concerned that student protests will coalesce with struggles by workers over jobs, living standards and social conditions.

More than 20 doctors at Mt Hagen General Hospital, the biggest referral hospital in the Highlands, voted unanimously on June 17 to resign *en masse*. Over 200 nurses walked off the job, leaving only the emergency and labour wards operating. Staff allege mismanagement and corrupt practices at the hospital and by the provincial health authority. The National Doctors Association intervened on Thursday, ordering a return to work. Severe government spending cutbacks have already resulted in reductions of 40 percent across the health system.

The WSWs previously warned that students need a fundamentally different political strategy to that pursued by the SRC leaderships. None of the immense social problems can be addressed, let alone resolved, simply by replacing O’Neill with another representative of the ruling class. The only means of defending the social and democratic rights of young people and working people is on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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