

Doctors strike against Papua New Guinea government

John Braddock
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Opposition to the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government of Prime Minister Peter O'Neill escalated on Monday, with doctors declaring they would only attend emergency cases until parliament meets again on Friday.

Following an order by the country's Supreme Court, parliament sat last Friday for the tabling of an opposition motion of no-confidence in O'Neill, before adjourning for a week when the vote will take place. The ruling was a sign of sharpening tensions within the PNG elite under conditions of spiralling social turmoil. The court declared that repeated government attempts to block previous no-confidence motions posed "a real threat to parliamentary democracy," and warned of legal sanctions if its decision was not implemented.

After meeting over the weekend with pilots, maritime workers and energy workers, the National Doctors Association supported demands that O'Neill stand down to face questioning over allegations of corruption. Doctors' consultations and non-urgent medical procedures have been cancelled. "This will affect ordinary citizens," association secretary Sam Yockopua warned, "but we need to place pressure on our politicians at a time of dire need." Nurses will continue to work but many services will be shut.

The association is also demanding the restoration of public health funds, which have been slashed by up to 40 percent amid drastic government austerity measures. Yockopua declared on Facebook that PNG is facing "catastrophic meltdown" from the combination of "corruption with financial debt, slashing of health sector funding, and diminished production of health workers."

The broadening opposition movement follows almost two months of protests and class boycotts at three universities, culminating in the police shooting of

demonstrators at the University of Papua New Guinea campus on June 8. The student protest movement was suppressed, but the academic year was cancelled on July 5 after authorities failed to force a resumption of classes.

Since last Wednesday, "sick-outs" by airline pilots have caused ongoing disruptions to air services, with thousands of people stranded by grounded or delayed domestic and international flights. With air transport the principal means of travel around the country, the pilots' stoppages are having a major impact.

Pilots have stopped work in response to an appeal by an opposition grouping, the Concerned Citizens Coalition (CCC), which includes aviation workers, lawyers and union officials. Spokesman and lawyer Moses Murray told Radio NZ: "I would not prefer the word strike." Instead, pilots and doctors simply "exercised their conscience not to attend work." Murray emphasised that the protests were "peaceful" and not intended to disrupt essential services.

Despite attempts by the protest and union leaderships to limit industrial action by the working class, opposition among key sections of workers is intensifying. Radio New Zealand reported that port workers are deliberately working slowly, in defiance of "advice" by the Maritime and Transport Workers unions not to take part in the protests.

Already this year, the doctors' union has ended strikes at Lae General Hospital, including a two-week sit-in by senior staff and nurses in March. Complaints revealed there had been no microbiology unit for 13 years in the hospital, the operating theatre had been closed for eight months, the blood test section had been shut for six months and the blood bank crippled for a year. Many issues remain unresolved despite a government "inquiry."

The protests are taking place in defiance of government threats to mobilise the police and armed forces to suppress any strike action. The newly-formed National Joint Security Taskforce, which includes the defence force and the national intelligence organisation, and operates under the command of the police commissioner, has been ordered to take action to counter civil unrest and “threats against the State.”

O’Neill’s Peoples National Congress party, with around 50 MPs, remains the largest party in the parliament. However, while the government still has a commanding majority, it is increasingly beleaguered.

Over 70 pro-government MPs have gone on a retreat this week at Alotau, the capital of Milne Bay Province on the far southeastern tip of the country, where they will stay until parliament resumes. The main purpose of the retreat is to corral members of the fragile governing coalition and keep them in lock-down, away from both popular pressure and lobbying efforts by the opposition.

The opposition parties claim to have 30 of the 56 MPs required to pass a no-confidence vote. Last Friday, four New Generation Party (NGP) members joined government minister Ben Micah and his Peoples Progress Party in defecting to the opposition. NGP leader Bire Kimisopa said the state of the economy, nationwide protests, and O’Neill’s evasion of corruption charges led to his decision to cross the floor. An opposition spokesperson said more MPs quit the government on Saturday.

A prominent opposition figure is former prime minister Michael Somare, who was a member of the pro-government National Alliance Party until late last year. Last week, he described PNG as “heading down an uncertain, slippery road, led by a man behaving increasingly like a dictator, showing total disregard for the law.” He repeated his previous demand that O’Neill resign.

International and domestic business interests are expressing alarm at the political instability swirling around the O’Neill government and over the rapidly deteriorating economy. China’s Xinhua news agency reported on June 30 that business confidence has been “rocked” by a combination of events stemming from the slumping oil and gas prices and spiralling government debt. The PNG kina has fallen 14.6 percent since July 2014, but analysts predict it needs to fall

another 40 percent for exports to become competitive.

Opposition leader Don Polye declared he is confident of ousting O’Neill and forming a new government on Friday. The opposition, however, has no fundamental disagreement with the austerity agenda being imposed. Polye was O’Neill’s treasurer until 2014 and played a critical role in cutting social spending and attacking living standards.

None of PNG’s immense economic and social problems can be addressed, let alone resolved, simply by replacing O’Neill with another representative of the ruling class. Like the students, workers need a fundamentally different political strategy to that pursued by the trade unions, establishment political parties and civic organisations. The only means of defending the social and democratic rights of the working class and youth is on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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