

New Zealand: Anti-TPP protests promote economic protectionism

Our reporters
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Protests were held in New Zealand on Saturday against the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the US-led trade agreement covering 12 Pacific Rim countries signed in Auckland last February. The “day of action,” organised by the “It’s Our Future” coalition under the slogan “Rally for Democracy,” was held in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and seven regional centres.

While tens of thousands rallied in February, these protests struggled to draw more than about 200 to each venue. The organisers said the TPP is now facing opposition from both main candidates in the US presidential election, but maintained that the TPP and other trade deals remain a threat to New Zealand’s “sovereignty.”

According to It’s Our Future spokespersons, Auckland University law professor Jane Kelsey and newly-appointed Greens MP Barry Coates, the purpose of the rallies was to link the TPP to climate action, Maori issues, social justice and workers’ rights. A raft of environmentalist and animal rights groups and trade union bureaucrats participated.

In line with sections of the ruling class, the rallies opposed the TPP from the standpoint of protectionism and economic nationalism. They also denounced the rival Chinese-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the Trade in Services Agreement negotiations, and a proposed NZ-European Union Free Trade Agreement.

The TPP previously attracted opposition from working people because of provisions handing more power to big business. The agreement will strengthen multinational corporations throughout the Asia-Pacific region, facilitating the outsourcing of jobs and attacks on workers’ conditions. Companies will be able to sue governments in investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) tribunals if legislation cuts into their profits.

The main thrust of the TPP, however, is as the economic spearhead of a US offensive that aims at the total subordination of China to its economic and strategic interests. It goes hand-in-hand with the US military build-up throughout the Asia-Pacific, the strengthening of alliances and accelerating preparations for war against China.

This central aspect has been covered up by the anti-TPP campaign organisers. As in previous rallies, speakers from the Labour Party, the Greens, Mana, New Zealand First, the Maori Party and the trade unions, were silent about the agreement’s role in Washington’s war preparations.

This is no oversight. The entire political establishment supports New Zealand’s alliance with US imperialism and its integration in the Obama administration’s anti-China “pivot to Asia,” which has been carried out largely behind the backs of the population. The Labour Party and the Greens have led attacks on Chinese investment and foreign workers, and welcomed the forthcoming visit by a US warship, which will break NZ’s long-standing “anti-nuclear” stance.

The TPP is opposed on the grounds that it is “not in the interests of New Zealand.” On this basis, all the “opposition” parties have coalesced with the anti-immigrant NZ First Party and the Maori Party, which is part of the National-led coalition government, to decry “foreign corporations.” Their aim is to defend the less competitive sections of New Zealand capital, including Maori tribal-based and “green” businesses, which fear competition from increased foreign investment.

In an attempt to appeal to workers, the reactionary nationalist essence of the anti-TPP program is hidden behind populist rhetoric. Addressing the Wellington rally, Sam Huggard of the Council of Trade Unions

said: “The TPP isn’t about trade ... it’s about a transfer of power largely to corporations who can benefit from having free access in a global market to make as much wealth as they want to off the backs of workers and communities.” Noting that workers had lost \$NZ19 billion through their falling share of national income since the 1980s, Huggard called for “sharing a little bit of power with the workers of this country.”

In fact, the unions have collaborated with New Zealand corporations and governments in implementing savage job cuts and attacks on conditions for three decades. Local businesses are no less exploitative than their overseas counterparts. As the social crisis and inequality deepens, the unions are seeking to channel growing anger among workers in a nationalist direction, agitating for trade barriers and cuts to immigration.

NZ Nurses Organisation president Grant Brookes, a member of the pseudo-left Fightback group, spoke at the Wellington rally. He praised Bernie Sanders’ campaign in the US for building “the groundswell of opposition in the Democratic Party,” which had forced US politicians to go “cold on the deal.”

Likewise, Kelsey told the Auckland rally: “People are saying no and shifting the ground of what was mainstream politics in the US, including the Democratic Party ... the politicians there have had to start taking notice of the people.” Neither speaker mentioned Sanders’ craven endorsement of Hillary Clinton or the Democrats’ threats of war against Russia and China.

As the WSWS has pointed out, capitalist trade deals can be opposed from the left—on the basis of genuine socialism and the struggle to unite the working class across all national borders—or from the right, on the basis of nationalism, militarism and xenophobia. Like Sanders, the anti-TPP lobby in New Zealand opposes the deal from the right.

Ariana Paretutanganui, speaking for the Maori nationalist Mana Party, gave a particularly xenophobic speech to the Wellington rally. She told NZ First “Mana is not your enemy” and appealed for collaboration between the two parties. She declared: “It is insane that they’re allowing foreign speculators to buy up land ... We have actually been taken over by foreign investors and speculators and by corporate interests.” The pseudo-left groups Fightback and

Socialist Aotearoa are both affiliated with Mana and support its nationalist politics.

NZ First spokesperson Amanda Vickers postured as an opponent of “neo-liberal free market, unbridled capitalism” and “unprecedented inequality.” She called for “capitalism with a human face,” saying “we put New Zealanders first, not corporates first.” NZ First, founded in the 1990s with a vicious campaign against Asian immigration, has been part of coalition governments led by both Labour and the National Party. It has helped impose cuts to public spending and lower taxes for the rich, along with more funding for the military and police.

Labour Party finance spokesman Grant Robertson covered up his party’s record, declaring that the opposition parties had to “reject the neo-liberal model, reject the trickle-down economics that have failed, and come together to build a new society, built on valuing people before money.” In reality, Labour governments privatised publicly-owned companies, slashed taxes for the rich and oversaw the sacking of tens of thousands of workers and the destruction of whole industries.

The growing agitation for protectionist trade policies serves the most reactionary ends. It is a turn to the economic nationalism that erupted in the 1930s, cloaked in either fascistic or “progressive” garb, which pitted countries against each other and paved the way for World War II.



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