

Papua New Guinea: Air Niugini sacks pilots over protest action

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Papua New Guinea's national airline has sacked eight pilots who took part in a protest action against Prime Minister Peter O'Neill in July. Air Niugini CEO Simon Foo confirmed last week that the pilots were dismissed as "disciplinary measures."

The pilots had called in sick over a period of a week in mid-July amid a withdrawal of services by other sections of the working class, including maritime, health and energy sector workers. Their action came ahead of a parliamentary motion of no-confidence against the prime minister, which he subsequently defeated.

The eight pilots are captains Joe Kumasi, Ben Lopa, Vince Tongia and Norman Daniel, and first officers Boris Ageda, Elijah Yuangi, David Sekan and Abel Kanengo. Their dismissal by the state-owned airline is part of a vicious witch-hunt of protesters as part of broader repression against opposition to the government's austerity program.

The prime responsibility for the sackings, however, rests with the trade unions and the "professional" Concerned Citizens Coalition (CCC) group. These organisations isolated the pilots and promoted the bankrupt perspective that individual protests would pressure the government to make concessions.

The pilots had joined thousands of university students who boycotted classes in the country's main tertiary institutions for over two months, demanding that O'Neill step aside to face fraud allegations. The protests climaxed on June 8 when heavily-armed police fired on unarmed students at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG), wounding at least 23 people.

When the university re-opened on September 5 after a two-month shutdown designed to suppress the protest movement, eight student leaders were permanently barred from their studies. The UPNG Student

Representative Council was also disbanded. In protest over the leaders' victimisation, students boycotted a "reconciliation" ceremony organised by the university administration.

Throughout these confrontations, the opposition parties under leader Don Polye manoeuvred to confine the anti-government sentiment to the issue of O'Neill's corruption. Corruption, however, is rife throughout the country's venal ruling elites. The parliamentary opposition has no fundamental disagreement with the government's anti-working class austerity program.

Workers, youth and the rural poor face a sharpening assault on living standards. The collapse of global commodities prices has devastated the PNG economy. Growth has plunged from 13.3 percent in 2014 to a forecast 2.4 percent in 2017. In response to plummeting revenues, and under pressure from international financial institutions, the government has slashed spending, resulting in public servants not being paid and deep cuts to the health and education budgets.

The government struck a last-minute deal with the PNG Nurses Association (PNGNA) on September 13 to cancel a nationwide strike by 5,000 nurses over unpaid salaries. The agreement, under which the government and unions will impose further "savings" in the 2016 budget, is a betrayal. Thousands of nurses will continue to be improperly paid while public services and the living conditions of the working class are savaged to meet budget shortfalls.

O'Neill's People's National Congress-led government is turning to intimidation and authoritarian measures to suppress popular resistance. Before securing the collaboration of the PNGNA, it declared the nurses' strike illegal. Previously, following a walkout by doctors at Mt Hagen Hospital on August 24, the third this year, the health minister ordered the

doctors to return to work under threats of dismissal and legal action.

In July, the government threatened to mobilise the police and armed forces to suppress strikes. The National Security Advisory Council established a National Security Joint Task Force, including police and military personnel, to “quell increasing internal security threats.” O’Neill responded to the pilots’ protest by declaring: “If you do not go to work, you are breaching your employment contract and you will be dealt with (by the company), as simple as that (because) it is not an industrial issue.”

Air Niugini CEO Foo told the *National* last week that the eight pilots were dismissed for taking part in a “politically-motivated” stop-work. “The sudden increase in the number of national pilots reporting sick and unable to attend work from July 13 to 20 affected Air Niugini flights,” he said. “Air Niugini’s image and branding was severely tarnished, losing valued customers to the opposition airlines both domestically and internationally and incurring significant financial loss.”

Captain James Makop, a spokesman for the CCC, which includes aviation workers, lawyers and union officials, said the sackings were made under duress to satisfy the company’s “political masters’ need for punitive measures.” He told *Loop PNG* the decision was “presumptuous” and against regulations.

The CCC, however, insists that the pilots should appeal to the courts to seek reinstatement, claiming it is “a subject for the Labour and Industry Department and the judiciary to adjudicate.” In other words, the CCC and the unions will take no action to defend the pilots and their fate will be decided in the capitalist courts.

The government and Air Niugini have been able to victimise the pilots only because the unions and the CCC had no intention of waging a political and industrial campaign against the government. Even after their members took action, the National Doctor’s Association (NDA), National Airline Employees’ Association and the energy workers’ union refused to sanction any strikes.

A CCC spokesman, lawyer Moses Murray, told Radio New Zealand in July that his organisation was not calling for strikes but only for people not to go to work. “It’s not militant in nature,” he said. “I would not prefer the word strike.” Pilots and doctors, he said,

had simply “exercised their conscience not to attend work.” Murray emphasised that the protests were not intended to disrupt essential services.

Other unions openly backed O’Neill. PNG Trade Union Congress general secretary John Paska slammed the parliamentary opposition’s no-confidence vote as “baseless and unjustified.” Port workers worked a go-slow for over a week in defiance of orders by the Maritime and Transport Workers unions not to take part in the protests.

The CCC and the unions do not represent the interests of the working masses, but tie them to the political ruling establishment and work to suppress the emerging struggles against the deepening onslaught on living standards and basic rights.



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