

After the Papua New Guinea election: The way forward for the working class and rural poor

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When Papua New Guinea (PNG) was granted formal independence in 1975, the promise was held out of a period of economic expansion and prosperity that would lift the country out of the backwardness and poverty bequeathed by Australian colonial rule. The people through parliament, not Australian bureaucrats, would determine the priorities and policies that would meet their pressing needs for jobs and basic services.

More than four decades later, the current national election is mired in bribery and corruption, ballot rigging and the wholesale omission of names from the electoral roll. It has underscored the utter contempt of the O'Neill government and the opposition parties alike for the basic democratic and social rights of the vast majority of the population.

Peter O'Neill, who seized office in 2011 by ousting Michael Somare in an illegal parliamentary coup, is determined to stay in power through any means. His promises of free health care and free education for all are an insult to the majority of the population, which has little or no access to essential social services. In its budget, the government has cut health and education by up to 40 percent, leaving schools and hospitals starved of basic resources.

Like his predecessors, O'Neill has not hesitated to use the police and the military to suppress protests and strikes against his government and its policies. Last year, the police opened fire on unarmed and peaceful student protesters calling for his dismissal and a new government.

At the same time, the opposition parties' denunciations of O'Neill for corruption are completely hypocritical. The entire political establishment and state apparatus is riddled with graft from top to bottom. The opposition coalition, which includes former prime ministers, Somare and Mekere Morauta, have attacked O'Neill from the right, accusing him of bankrupting the country and not going far enough in slashing budget spending.

Whoever leads the next government, its agenda is clear: a deepening assault on the already deplorable living conditions facing the bulk of the population, and police-state measures to suppress any opposition or protests.

The corrupt and venal character of the political elite is a

product of the organic weakness of the country's rudimentary capitalist class, which is completely dependent on transnational corporations and foreign investors. Successive governments have handed out lucrative tax breaks to the giant mining companies that dominate the economy, while making deep inroads into social services.

The worsening global economic crisis since 2008 has been manifested in a collapse of the mining boom, amid falling commodity prices, along with a crisis of government finance as tax revenues decline and debts balloon. The response of all the political parties will be another round of austerity measures that will place greater and greater burdens on working people.

The subservience of the ruling class in the economic sphere is paralleled by its kowtowing in foreign policy to the major and regional powers, above all to Australian imperialism. PNG is increasingly being swept up in the escalating geo-political tensions that are heightening the danger of war throughout the world, in particular the US-led confrontation and drive to war against China.

As the former colonial power, Australian imperialism has repeatedly used its considerable clout to protect its interests. In 2011, Canberra, which acts as the watchdog for Washington in the South Pacific, backed the ouster of Somare to put an end to his "look north" policy of seeking closer ties with China.

Australia is the largest donor of PNG aid, which it exploits to strong-arm Port Moresby into doing its bidding, including the installation of "advisers" in key positions. Australian police and military, along with other officials, have been closely involved in running the current election.

At stake are longstanding economic interests. Almost 5,000 Australian companies conduct business in PNG, with total investments worth \$A5.8 billion. As well as substantial investment in mining, Australian corporations have major shares in other key sectors, including banking, insurance and retail. Strategically, Australia has regarded PNG and the other Pacific island states as its backyard.

While a tiny elite layer enriches itself on the crumbs from the profits of the transnational miners, the vast majority of the population lives in abject poverty and economic backwardness.

Some 85 percent of people live in rural areas, many on the margins of the modern economy, eking out an existence on semi-subsistence agriculture and without proper access to basic services, including health and education.

The country's social statistics reveal the appalling situation. PNG's ranking on the latest UN Human Development index is 154 out of 188, lower than any other country in the Asia Pacific, except Solomon Islands. According to UN figures, 39 percent of PNG's people live below the poverty line of \$US1.90 a day and 66.5 percent of the workforce earn less than \$3.10 a day. They are classified as "working poor."

The deterioration of the public health system, compounded by a lack of roads and the remoteness of many villages, has had a devastating impact. Malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS are widespread. Life expectancy is just 62.8 years with 44.5 babies out of every 1,000 dying before the age of one year, and 49.5 percent of children under the age of five suffering moderate or severe stunting. This is compared to Australian statistics of life expectancy of 82.5 years with 3 babies dying out of every 1,000 and 2 percent of children suffering stunting.

PNG's adult literacy rate is 64.2 percent, the average number of years of schooling is 4.3 and just 11.7 percent of the population over the age of 25 has some secondary schooling. As of 2012, only 18 percent of the population had access to electricity, only 40 percent to clean water and 19 percent to proper sanitation.

These figures make a mockery of the goal, embedded in the 1975 constitution, of "achieving an equitable distribution of incomes and other benefits of development." None of the 44 parties and around 2,821 election candidates has the slightest intention of closing the immense social gulf between rich and poor.

The election campaign has been nothing more than a disgusting scramble for the 111 seats based on narrow, parochial appeals to tribal and regional loyalties. A seat in parliament not only guarantees a hefty base salary of \$33,500 a year—compared to a national average income of just \$1,400—but also access to development funds worth more than \$3 million, which are used to reward supporters in each electorate.

A new political road is needed to fight for the rights of working people. More than four decades after independence, the capitalist class and its political parties have proven totally incapable of meeting the democratic aspirations and basic social needs of the vast majority of the population.

The struggle for democratic and social rights is indissolubly bound up with ending the economic and political domination of the major powers and transnational corporations. But the local capitalist elites are terrified of invoking any popular movement against imperialism because to do so would inevitably bring the working class into political struggle and threaten their class interests.

As a result, the working class is the only social force that is capable of fighting for the democratic rights and decent living

standards for all. It can do so only on the basis of a program to abolish the capitalist profit system and reorganise society along socialist lines to meet the pressing needs of working people, not fatten the profits of a tiny wealthy few. A revolutionary movement of the working class against poverty, social inequality and oppression would find powerful support among the poor in the villages and urban shanties.

The struggle to put an end to capitalism is necessarily international in scope. Workers in PNG confront the same exploitation, often by the same transnational corporations, as their fellow workers throughout the Asia-Pacific and the world. Only through a unified struggle with workers internationally—above all in the Pacific states, Australia, and Indonesia—can the working class in PNG establish genuine democracy, end neo-colonial oppression and gain control over the productive capacity and resources it requires to answer its social needs and those of the rural poor.

These fundamental political principles were first enunciated by Leon Trotsky in his *Theory of Permanent Revolution*. They underpinned the revolutionary movement of the working class, led by the Bolsheviks, that took power in Russia in October 1917 and created the first, and to date only, genuine socialist workers' state. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was not due to the failure of socialism, but rather was the result of its protracted decay and degeneration produced by the betrayals of the Stalinist bureaucracy and its reactionary conception that socialism could be built in a single country.

The way forward in PNG and all the Pacific Island states is the establishment of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement and publisher of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

A section of the ICFI, that is a revolutionary socialist and internationalist party, will fight for the complete political independence of the working class from all the parties and representatives of the ruling elites. It will be based on the scientific principles of Marxism and the strategic lessons of the struggle led by Leon Trotsky against Stalinism.

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and the ICFI urges workers, students and young people in PNG and the Pacific who agree with this perspective to contact us for further discussion.



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