

Papua New Guinea: Thousands strike over extravagant APEC spending

John Braddock
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Thousands of people joined a one-day strike in Papua New Guinea (PNG) on October 26 to protest the purchase of a fleet of luxury cars for use during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, beginning on November 17. The government of Prime Minister Peter O'Neill presides over one of the world's most impoverished countries.

The stoppage, dubbed the "Maserati strike," was organised after the government imported 40 high-end Maseratis, costing up to \$350,000 each, and three luxury Bentleys, to ferry dignitaries during the conference in the capital Port Moresby.

The 21-member APEC summit, the first to be held in a Pacific island nation, will be attended by US Vice President Mike Pence, China's president Xi Jinping and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, along with 9,000 delegates, staff and media. Amid deepening geo-strategic tensions across the Asia-Pacific and the drive to war, Canberra and Beijing have vied to provide millions of dollars in financial, logistical and infrastructure backing for the event.

The *Guardian* reported that O'Neill's extravagant vehicle purchase was greeted with widespread "anger and disbelief," particularly in the desperately impoverished provincial areas. Martyn Namorong, a PNG commentator and one of the protest organisers, said the fact the purchase was only revealed in a news report highlighted the lack of "transparency" around government spending.

Namorong declared that the strike was not a protest against the summit. "It's a protest against the corruption associated with the hosting of APEC. It's not a protest against world leaders, it's a protest against our own corrupt, unaccountable politicians," he said.

The Minister for APEC, Justin Tkatchenko, claimed the costs would be recouped by selling the cars to the

private sector, predicting they would be snapped up "like hot cakes." Transparency International (TI) said O'Neill had failed to reveal procurement documents, let alone any likely purchasers. A TI spokesman told Radio New Zealand the cars would likely be on-sold to people "in the know," at knock-down prices and minus freight charges or import duties.

Opposition MPs called the national day of protest, urging people to boycott work and stay at home. Strikers reportedly included transport drivers and airport staff. Bryan Kramer, MP for Madang, said the boycott was successful and there was "very little traffic on the road" during Port Moresby's peak hour. In the north of the country, bus drivers refused to work in Wewak, and in Lae, PNG's second largest city, many people simply attended an agriculture show.

The strikers defied threats from government officials. Chief Secretary Isaac Lupari declared that public servants who failed to report for work would be "in breach of the Public Service Act and their employment conditions." Police commissioner Gary Baki warned that police would "not tolerate" protests or marches.

In response to growing social opposition, the government has increasingly turned to repressive measures. Last month parliament passed legislation giving unprecedented powers to foreign forces and security personnel during APEC. A former PNG defence force commander Jerry Singirok told Radio NZ that the legislation violates the country's constitution. He said that under the law change, basic rights of citizens could be over-ridden by external security forces.

The "Maserati strike" was supported by some trade unions, including the PNG Banks and Financial Institutions Workers Union. However John Paska, president of the PNG Trade Union Congress, distanced

the central union organisation from the boycott. He said wages, housing, health and education were more pressing issues to protest than the Maseratis, and APEC was “too important” to risk it being “derailed.”

In fact, the escalating spending on APEC is intensifying widespread anger over the country’s dire social conditions and the government’s austerity measures. The entire ruling elite, which is mired in corruption, is responsible for a growing economic catastrophe. The culprits include opposition MPs, who organised the protest in order to head off spiralling disenchantment with the whole political establishment.

A Radio NZ report broadcast on October 28, headed “PNG to host APEC—but is it leaders before locals?” outlined the “social turmoil” and failure of basic services facing the country’s eight million citizens. Severe health crises are worsened by chronic shortages of medicines and inadequate vaccination programs. In June, health authorities confirmed that the country was experiencing its first outbreak of polio in 18 years. Deadly diseases such as Malaria, TB and HIV AIDS are also resurgent.

Radio NZ correspondent Johnny Blades noted: “Shortages of basic drugs and supplies echo shortages of health workers, rather like the situation in schools, where there are often not enough teachers for overcrowded classrooms, where up to 70 students can be taught at once, or funding shortfalls force closure.” The remote Highlands region is still suffering from February’s magnitude 7.5 earthquake which caused almost 200 deaths and extensive devastation.

While most of the population lives in abject poverty after decades of imperialist exploitation, PNG is resource-rich. It is the site of lucrative transnational mining projects, including the Ok Tedi copper and gold mine, oilfields in the highlands and the \$US20 billion ExxonMobil liquefied natural gas plant. Corrupt business leaders and politicians, operating in the interests of foreign banks and corporations, have systematically looted these resources at the expense of working people.

There has been an upsurge in social and political unrest since the 2017 election. O’Neill’s government, now in its second term, is widely regarded as illegitimate. An analysis by the Australian National University, cited this week by the *Guardian*, concluded the election was “hijacked.” The vote was undermined

by brazen electoral fraud—including failures in the electoral roll, theft and destruction of ballot boxes, and payments by candidates for votes—amid unprecedented violence and insecurity.

The report further exposes the contempt for the basic rights of ordinary people held by all the parliamentary parties. Tribal violence has surged again, adding to the death toll from fighting between supporters of rival candidates in the elections. A state of emergency was declared in June across the Southern Highlands after major unrest erupted, in which an Air Niugini passenger plane was destroyed at Mendi airport.

Preparations for APEC are being carried out under the closest scrutiny of the US and local imperialist powers—Australia and New Zealand. PNG is of vital economic and strategic importance to both Canberra and Washington in their drive to dominate the Asia-Pacific and block the rise of China.

Australia, PNG’s former colonial overlord, has already stepped up its military presence. Special force soldiers have been secretly despatched, supposedly to help secure Port Moresby ahead of the summit. Australian navy warships will be stationed off the coast, purportedly to protect the cruise ships that will be used for temporary APEC accommodation. A contingent of Australian Federal Police, already deployed to PNG, is to remain on duty.

New Zealand’s Foreign Minister Winston Peters and Defence Minister Ron Mark announced yesterday that the Labour-led government will deploy a naval ship, a military surveillance aircraft and 30 Special Operations soldiers to APEC at the request of the PNG government.



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