

# Rift widens between Australia and Pacific Island states

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High-level recriminations are continuing in the wake of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) which was riven by a bitter dispute over the Australian government's refusal to agree to limit coal production in order to address climate change.

Australia is one of the world's largest coal exporters and the highest carbon emitter in the Pacific region, where global warming and rising seas are an existential threat to low-lying coastal communities. Tuvalu, where the PIF was held, is one of the most vulnerable. At the three-day summit Pacific leaders confronted Australia and New Zealand, two regional imperialist powers, over their inaction on climate change.

The leaders' communique passed with a qualification that not all countries supported a call for an immediate global ban on new coal-fired power plants and coalmines and for all countries to rapidly phase out the use of coal in the power sector.

The rift over climate change has revealed profound geo-political tensions in the region. Impoverished Pacific island states are seeking to reduce their dependence on Australia and New Zealand by increasing economic relations with China.

Following the summit, a recording revealed Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's deputy Michael McCormack telling a business audience that Pacific island workers displaced by climate change would "come here and pick our fruit." The exploitative seasonal worker program, which also runs in New Zealand, employs low-paid workers from Pacific countries in the agriculture and horticulture sectors. Selected workers can stay for up to nine months before being sent back home.

Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama told the *Guardian* that Morrison had only attended the summit "to make sure that the Australian policies were upheld

by the Pacific island nations." He slammed Morrison for "alienating" Pacific leaders and warned that this would push them closer to China, adding "the Chinese don't insult us." Enele Sopoaga, Tuvalu's prime minister and forum chair, promptly threatened to withdraw from the seasonal worker program. He described Morrison's conduct at the summit as "ignorant," "un-Pacific" and "neo-colonial."

Bainimarama hit back at McCormack's comment on Twitter, declaring: "If this is the Australian government's idea of a 'step up' in its relations with the Pacific, it's certainly not a step forward. It's a big step backwards." The term "step up" referred to Canberra's efforts to boost its presence in the Pacific in order to combat the rise of China. Bainimarama, a former military strongman and coup leader, has denounced the PIF as being dominated by Australia and New Zealand, and encouraged other Pacific states to strike a more "independent" stance.

Former Kiribati President Aote Tong said Australia should be sanctioned or suspended from the PIF over Canberra's pro-coal stance. The *Sydney Morning Herald* quoted Tong saying that if a country caused harm to others, such as by fueling climate change, "there should be sanctions." Tong said the recent approval of the Adani Carmichael coal mine in Queensland was an example of "ignoring the science that's coming forward."

Beijing condemned Australia for acting like a "condescending master" towards Pacific countries. China's foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang issued a statement saying Pacific leaders do not share Australia's fear of Chinese influence in the Pacific and accused Australian leaders of a "cold war mentality."

Australia's ruling elite have made clear they have no intention of ceding any ground to the Pacific states over

climate change or accepting the growth of Chinese influence. An article in Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper on August 18 by right-wing commentator Jennifer Oriel declared that "island leaders [at the PIF] sounded more like Politburo puppets than Christian allies."

Oriel repeated the ongoing hysteria in the Australian media and political establishment, labelling China a "rising power on an expansionist course." She accused the Pacific leaders of "playing a dangerous game of cat-and-mouse between the US and China," claiming they were "using the threat of a fortified China-Pacific alliance to blackmail Australia into more foreign aid."

While Australia remains the largest donor to the region, China's aid to the Pacific has increased significantly in recent years, pledging \$4 billion to the region in 2017 alone.

Oriel claimed that Beijing is making deals in the Pacific with vulnerable states "weakened by political corruption, government profligacy and consequent debt." Oriel rounded on Sopoaga, who had criticised Morrison's offer of \$500 million in aid—funded from existing budgets—on the basis that it did nothing to combat the root causes of climate change. She absurdly claimed that Australia's aid would "help our region defend the free world and Christian majority countries against communist tyranny."

This turns reality on its head. Australia and New Zealand have integrated themselves with Washington's intensification of the economic, diplomatic and military build-up against Beijing, threatening a catastrophic war.

In order to push back against Chinese influence in the Pacific, Canberra has channeled ever larger amounts of aid including a pledge of \$A3 billion (\$US2.11 billion) in cheap loans and grants to Papua New Guinea.

Canberra is also seeking to strengthen its military presence. It was revealed last month that the Australian Defence Force will create a new military unit dedicated to training and assisting Pacific "allies." Based in Brisbane, the so-called Pacific Support Force will seek to establish Australia as the "security partner of choice" for Pacific nations, creating a new expeditionary training force to work with key regional neighbours.

New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters has repeatedly appealed to the Trump administration to increase its military presence in the Pacific to counter

China. Jacinda Ardern's Labour-NZ First government has greatly increased NZ's diplomatic presence in the region, while continuing to carry out regular military exercises that are explicitly aimed at preparing to invade an island country.

While alleging that Morrison's intransigent approach to the PIF had "damaged relationships" with Pacific leaders, Australian opposition Labor Party foreign affairs spokesperson Penny Wong admitted that her party would also have opposed the climate change action demanded by PIF leaders. She declared that coal was an "important industry to Australia" and "part of the global energy mix." Wong told the ABC that Labor would have refused to accept any wording in the PIF communique for an "immediate coal ban" on new coalmines and coal-fired power plants.

Labor's only concern was that Morrison's language would deter Pacific island nations from collaborating with Australia instead of China. "We have to recognise that the Pacific island nations can choose who they do work with. We want to work to be the partner of choice," she said.

Labor, no less than the ruling Liberal Party, fully supports the US alliance against China and Australia's own neo-colonial role in the Pacific, including recent military interventions into East Timor and the Solomon Islands.

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