

May Day 2022: The class struggle in the Asia-Pacific

Tom Peters
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This is the report delivered by Tom Peters to the 2022 International May Day Online Rally held on May 1. Peters is a leading member of the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand, which is fighting to build a section of the ICFI. To view all speeches, visit wsws.org/mayday.

On behalf of the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand, I want to extend revolutionary greetings to everyone joining this online May Day rally, including viewers from throughout the South Pacific.

The Pacific is caught in the middle of an unprecedented military build-up by US imperialism and its allies, including Australia and New Zealand, aimed against China. Workers across the impoverished region also confront soaring social inequality, environmental disasters, and a mounting death toll from the pandemic.

In Tonga, a volcanic eruption and tsunami in January wiped out entire villages and destroyed food crops, crippling the country's economy.

This disaster is now compounded by COVID-19, which was most likely brought to Tonga by one of the military vessels sent to deliver aid from Australia and other countries. So far, at least 11 Tongans have died.

Samoa, Vanuatu and Kiribati also recorded their first COVID-19 deaths this year, after previously being isolated from the pandemic.

Last year, when COVID ripped through Papua New Guinea, Fiji and French Polynesia, hospitals were overwhelmed and morgues filled to capacity.

Thousands more lives are now at risk in countries with little health care infrastructure, low vaccination rates, and widespread poverty-related illnesses such as diabetes.

Responsibility for these preventable deaths rests

primarily with the imperialist countries, including Australia and New Zealand, which regard the Pacific as their colonial “backyard.” While Canberra and Wellington denounce Chinese influence as a threat that must be countered by huge increases in military spending, the same governments have dropped any pretence of trying to stop COVID-19.

Only our movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, fights for a fully funded, scientific global elimination strategy—which is opposed by every capitalist government.

Last October, the Labour Party-Greens coalition government in New Zealand abandoned its Zero-COVID policy, which had saved thousands of lives. The decision shocked people throughout the world who saw New Zealand as proof that elimination was achievable.

The about-face by Jacinda Ardern's government was made at the insistence of big business, which views lockdowns and all public health measures as an intolerable barrier to profit-making. It was a completely anti-democratic decision. Workers, who strongly supported elimination, were never asked if they wanted to ditch the policy and adopt one of mass infection.

All the claims used to justify the “let it rip” policy—including that Omicron is “mild,” and that vaccination alone will enable people to “live with” the virus—have been exposed as lies. In just four months, nearly one in five New Zealanders, 900,000 people, have been infected, according to official figures. The real figure is undoubtedly much higher.

New Zealand's death toll has shot up from 59 at the end of last year, to more than 700 as of last week. In the last fortnight, the deaths included one child aged under 9 and a person aged under 19.

The public health system has been overwhelmed,

with many essential operations cancelled. Hospitals in Northland, the poorest region, recently asked patients' families to assist with basic tasks normally performed by health care workers. One nurse described the situation in New Zealand to us as "soul destroying."

There is rising anger in the working class over the spread of COVID, as well as the unprecedented increase in social inequality.

The Ardern government has used the pandemic to give tens of billions of dollars to big business in the form of subsidies and bailouts. According to one calculation made last December, the value of shares, bonds and other non-bank financial assets increased by 36 percent, \$257 billion over two years. Meanwhile, the working class is suffering from soaring inflation, which has reached 6.9 percent, the highest level in 30 years.

Rents have risen by more than 25 percent in the last four years, leading to increased homelessness and overcrowding. Nearly one in four children lives in poverty, and this is certain to increase further.

As workers seek to fight back, they are coming into conflict with the trade unions, which have worked with the state apparatus to enforce the unsafe reopening of schools and businesses, and austerity measures, including a public sector pay freeze.

Nurses, who held a nationwide strike last year to demand safe levels of staffing and decent wages, have reacted angrily to a so-called pay equity deal between the government and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation, which completely fails to address the crisis in hospitals.

Two months ago, the Employment Court banned another strike by 10,000 health care workers in several different occupations—an extraordinary ruling which points to the anti-democratic methods that will increasingly be used against the working class. The Public Service Association immediately capitulated to the court, calling off the strike.

The experience of the pandemic highlights the need for workers to build new organisations to fight for the elimination of COVID-19 and for decent wages and conditions. Rank-and-file workplace committees must be established, independent of the trade unions which are integrated into the capitalist set-up.

The same task is posed by the escalating danger of world war. The Labour government has dragged New Zealand into the war against Russia in order to secure

US support for New Zealand's own neo-colonial interests in the Pacific.

This month, the government sent more than 50 military personnel and an air force supply plane to Europe, along with millions of dollars to buy weapons for the US-NATO proxy forces in Ukraine.

As in every country, the drumbeat for war against Russia and China is intended to divert rising anger over the pandemic and the social crisis onto an external enemy.

The Socialist Equality Group stands alone in seeking to mobilise the working class in opposition to the war drive—which is backed by the unions and Labour's middle-class nationalist and pseudo-left allies.

The fight against war requires a socialist perspective, aimed at uniting workers across the world, in opposition to every form of nationalism and xenophobia. It is inseparable from the fight to put an end to capitalism, which is the source of inequality and the pandemic.

I urge everyone listening from New Zealand to contact the Socialist Equality Group, and join the fight to build the New Zealand section of the ICFI, the world party of socialist revolution.



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