

New Zealand M?ori “cultural experts” fawn over naming of Jeff Bezos’ superyacht

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According to the *New Zealand Herald* on January 12, a decision by American billionaire Jeff Bezos to bestow a M?ori name on his new superyacht has been met with enthusiastic fawning from New Zealand “cultural experts.”

The Amazon founder is naming his \$US500 million boat *Koru*, meaning “new beginnings and continuity.” The koru loop or coil, an integral symbol in M?ori art, is a spiral shape based on an unfurling silver fern frond. It is frequently used as a design motif, including by Air New Zealand, the national carrier.

The *Herald* hailed the naming on its Facebook page, commenting: “What a win for Aotearoa [New Zealand]!” The newspaper then located three prominent individuals, described as “M?ori cultural experts,” to endorse Bezos’ move.

The sycophantic comments by these representatives of the M?ori cultural, political and business elite reveal much about the class orientation of this privileged, venal layer and its indifference to the exploitation of tens of thousands of workers of all races.

“Cultural advisor and community advocate” Rangi McLean said Bezos’ decision was “a big positive for Aotearoa.” He declared: “I believe Bezos has taken on our way of life and is taking on board all those aspects. From what I have read, he understands what the koru means and stands for. To have our Kaupapa (principles), not only our reo (language) but our culture, on the world stage, is a good thing.”

In 2014 and 2017, McLean unsuccessfully stood for parliament as a candidate for the M?ori Party, which represents indigenous business interests and was part of the right-wing government led by the conservative National Party in power from 2008 to 2017.

Merepeka Raukawa-Tait, a former Rotorua district councillor and current chair of the Wh?nau Ora Commissioning Agency, which distributes government funding to tribal-run “by M?ori, for M?ori” social service providers, also weighed in. She said Bezos should take “the appropriate cultural measures” and have the boat blessed with a suitable M?ori delegation in attendance “to ensure safety of his boat and all those who sail on it.”

“It appears he knows the meaning of the word koru,” Raukawa-Tait said. “And [I] would love to think he would do

the right thing and have a naming ceremony that reflects the origin of the word and its significance to Aotearoa.”

Academic Bernie O’Donnell, a cultural adviser to Auckland University and chairman of the National Urban M?ori Authority—which negotiates for government funding for tribal-based businesses—also approved of Bezos’ decision. “Should it be that way? Absolutely, because that is normalisation of our culture and our language, and that’s where we need to go,” he declared.

Amid a global “explosion of inequality” documented this month by Oxfam, the superyacht is a grotesque display of opulence. At 127 metres, it is twice the length of an Airbus A380 and will be the tallest sailing yacht in the world. Masts are being fitted later to avoid a dismantling of the Koningshaven Bridge in Rotterdam, where it was built, after protests over the tycoon’s demand that the historical monument be disassembled to accommodate the craft.

The vessel requires a staff of 40 and will cost \$50 million a year to operate. It is accompanied by a separate “shadow yacht”—a newly constructed floating garage to carry Bezos’ likely collection of helicopters, cars, motorcycles, jet skis and other “toys.”

O’Donnell, Raukawa-Tait and McLean are hailing one of the richest people on the planet. Bezos has a net worth of over \$US109 billion, amassed through brutal operations that have led a sweeping assault on the jobs and conditions of workers globally.

On the *New Zealand Herald’s* Facebook page, many readers denounced the newspaper’s celebration of Bezos. A comment by Ray, which received over 170 “likes,” stated: “Doesn’t matter what he calls [the yacht]... he should be considering all those who made him a fortune in the first place. Where is he now they’re all losing their jobs. Obscenity just flaunting your wealth!!”

Amazon recently announced it will lay off 18,000 workers in the US amid the counteroffensive by the corporate and financial aristocracy against the demands of workers for better wages and working conditions, including at Amazon warehouses.

Amazon workers, universally low-paid and highly regimented, are confronted by health and safety violations, speedups, increased quotas, harassment and injuries. The US

National Council for Occupational Safety and Health in 2018 placed Amazon on its “dirty dozen” list of employers known for unsafe workplaces.

The deadly consequences saw the launching of US government investigations last year after three workers died in three weeks at Amazon warehouses. In 2022 there were two deaths in the company’s operations in Germany. In December 2021, six workers were killed at an Illinois fulfilment centre because Amazon refused to stop work despite tornado warnings.

Amazon is totally indifferent to the risk posed by coronavirus. In April 2020 Chicago Amazon workers marched outside a delivery facility in Chicago chanting, “Our lives matter!” after management revealed that two workers had tested positive for COVID-19. The firm acknowledged last year that nearly 20,000 Amazon and Whole Foods workers had tested positive for the virus, likely an underestimate.

These extreme conditions have fuelled a surge in protests and strikes in several countries, including during Amazon’s “Black Friday” promotion last November, prompting a rush by the trade unions to unionise facilities. The manoeuvre has largely failed due to the unions’ blatant collaboration with Amazon, their suppression of strikes and workplace actions, and ties to capitalist parties such as the Democrats in the US.

Amazon has no significant workforce in New Zealand, but if a warehouse were established, young Māori workers would be among those dragooned to help generate the company’s vast profits. A raft of “cultural experts” would no doubt be brought forward to reprise the absurd glorification of Bezos’ sensitivity towards the Māori “way of life” and, for a suitable fee, arrange culturally approved benedictions.

Under other circumstances the response could easily have been the opposite. Charges of “cultural appropriation” are often used to denounce any purported misuse of Māori traditions not sanctioned by these same “experts.”

Last year, for example, Rangi McLean took legal action against a German artist, Gerd Stritzel, who, without permission, used his tū moko (face tattoo) in images placed on the internet for sale. McLean’s lawyers sought to prevent the use of “any intellectual property, imagery or other material that infringes our clients’ rights or in any other way misappropriates or misuses Māori cultural images or is offensive to Māori.”

Yet McLean finds nothing “offensive” about Māori culture being appropriated by Bezos, who heads one of the world’s most rapacious corporations and whose net worth is equivalent to nearly eight times New Zealand’s public healthcare budget.

The three “cultural experts” quoted by the *Herald* are part of the Māori elite, who live in a different universe from the mass of the population, Māori and non-Māori alike. Since the 1980s, successive Labour and National Party governments have cultivated this layer through multi-million dollar payments to Māori tribes by the state, purportedly as compensation for the crimes of colonisation.

These payments have been used to establish lucrative business operations based on the exploitation of workers of all races. The proliferation of Māori entrepreneurs, academics, lawyers, politicians and state sector leaders serves as a buffer defending the profit system against the working class.

McLean’s Māori Party represents the interests of the indigenous bourgeoisie. When it was in government with National, following the 2008 financial crisis, the Māori Party supported major attacks on the working class, including an increase in consumption tax and the privatisation of social services, in exchange for handouts to the tribal elite.

For the Labour-led government, the promotion of Māori culture and language under the rubric of “bi-culturalism,” provides a “progressive” fig leaf for its escalating assault on the working class. Racial and gender identity politics—the obsession of Labour and the Greens’ upper middle class supporters and various pseudo-left organisations—plays a central role in diverting public attention from worsening social inequality, the devastating COVID pandemic, and New Zealand’s integration into US-led preparations for world war.

The craven worship of Jeff Bezos by members of the Māori elite highlights the fact that the fundamental division in society is not race, but class.

According to researcher Max Rashbrooke, wealth inequality within the indigenous population is twice as high as in the NZ population as a whole. Working class Māori, who make up 16 percent of the population, are heavily exploited: on every measure of social and economic wellbeing, including health, housing, education, income and wealth, Māori are highly disadvantaged.

As the economic and social crisis deepens, Māori workers will be driven into struggle alongside their class brothers and sisters of every ethnicity and nationality, in opposition to the Bezoses of the world, the wealthy business elite in New Zealand—Māori and non-Māori, and the capitalist system itself, which is the source of inequality and war.



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