

New Zealand's record of colonial oppression of the Cook Islands

Tom Peters
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Last month, New Zealand's political and media establishment erupted in outrage over the decision by the Cook Islands government to sign a wide-ranging strategic partnership agreement with China without consulting Wellington.

The Cook Islands is an archipelago of 15 islands about halfway between New Zealand and Hawaii, with a population of just 15,000. It is a semi-colony of New Zealand with limited self-government and, like all the impoverished countries in the Pacific, economically dependent on international aid and loans.

The Cooks' government agreed to collaborate with Beijing on economic development, including fisheries, infrastructure and potentially undersea minerals. The two countries also agreed to increase diplomatic relations, and to support each other's membership of multilateral bodies.

New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters declared that Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown had flouted the "responsibilities and obligations" under the "free association" arrangement with New Zealand—that is, the colonial model under which the Cook Islands must consult with the NZ government before making major foreign policy and security-related decisions.

The episode points to the extremely sharp geopolitical tensions in the Pacific, created by the US-led preparations for war against China. The ruling classes in New Zealand and Australia—both imperialist allies of the US—are seeking to block China's growing economic and diplomatic influence in the region, and are presenting Beijing in increasingly hysterical terms as a military threat.

The nationalist, anti-China frenzy in the media included a suggestion by *New Zealand Herald* columnist Matthew Hooton that New Zealand soldiers should be sent to occupy the Cook Islands. The pro-Labour Party *Daily Blog* accused Brown of "treason" and called for an increased NZ military presence in the Pacific.

Opposition Labour Party deputy leader Carmel Sepuloni told the Pacific Media Network "the concern that has been expressed by Winston Peters is valid," adding that Brown had questions to answer. Labour's ally Te Pahi Mōri's co-leader Debbie Ngarewa-Packer attended a protest in Avarua (the Cook Islands capital), led by the islands' opposition United Party, demanding an end to the China deal and Brown's resignation.

Peters warned that if the Cook Islands opted for more independence, beyond the free association framework, its citizens would lose their New Zealand citizenship. This would call into question the status of tens of thousands of Cook Islanders living in New Zealand and Australia.

Despite making these belligerent threats and seeking to destabilise the Brown government, the New Zealand government portrayed itself as a benevolent and humane ruler. A spokesperson for the foreign minister stated on February 9 that "Cook Islanders are treasured members of the New Zealand family" and that Peters wanted to "defend and protect the interests of Cook Islanders" as part of the "Realm of New Zealand," which also includes the Pacific territories of Tokelau and Niue.

Propaganda depicting New Zealand and Australia as the kind parents of

the Pacific "family" is repeated constantly by all capitalist parties. Its purpose is to cover up the brutal history of more than a century of oppression by these imperialist powers, which has produced appalling poverty, lack of public services, substandard housing and infrastructure that cannot withstand climate disasters, and chronic political instability.

Colonial rule in the Cook Islands

From New Zealand's earliest days as an outpost of the British Empire—established through the violent dispossession of indigenous Mōri tribes during the nineteenth century—the bourgeoisie had ambitions to create a "greater New Zealand" by expanding into the Pacific.

In 1901, Prime Minister Richard Seddon finally gained permission from Britain to annex the Cook Islands and Niue (Britain had established a colonial "protectorate" over the Cooks in 1888). In exchange, about 6,500 NZ troops were sent to fight for Britain in the Boer war in South Africa.

Seddon also wanted to take over the larger islands of Fiji and Samoa, but this was denied at the time. In 1914 New Zealand seized the opportunity provided by the First World War to invade Western Samoa, then a German colony. New Zealand, Australia and Britain also jointly annexed Nauru, which would supply a vast amount of phosphates for NZ's agricultural sector.

The three imperialist powers also ruthlessly exploited Banaba (Ocean Island), part of Kiribati, turning it into a phosphate mine and making it uninhabitable. Its population was forcibly relocated to Fiji in 1945. Another island of Kiribati, Kiritimati, was contaminated by nuclear testing by Britain and the US in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

By the time the Cook Islands was annexed, it had already suffered decades of depopulation from influenza, measles and other diseases brought by Europeans, as well as slave traders who shipped hundreds of people to Peru, where most perished. In 1863, out of 360 people taken aboard one slave ship, all but one died from dysentery and smallpox.

New Zealand appointed a resident commissioner in the administrative centre of Rarotonga, assisted by agents on each of the outer islands. They exercised dictatorial control over every aspect of the colony, and frequently punished minor offences with flogging and hard labour. The first, Resident Commissioner Walter Gudgeon, described Cook Islanders as "a dying race" and "lazy, sensual and thievish." He opposed the expansion of schools, saying that "to educate such men above the resources of the islands would be little short of criminal."^[1]

Successive administrations kept the islands in a state of extreme underdevelopment. The indigenous people, known as Cook Islands Mōri, worked on fruit and copra plantations; trade was dominated by a small number of New Zealand businesses, which fixed prices and kept wages down. Those Cook Islanders able to plant for themselves became heavily

indebted. The islands remained largely subsistence economies.

Public education and healthcare were extremely minimal. The only high school, Tereora College, established by missionaries in 1895, was shut down in 1911 and remained closed for more than four decades.

For decades there was just one poorly equipped hospital in the 15 islands. Preventable diseases, including those spread by mosquitoes, were rampant. According to historian Dick Scott, “The Cook Islands death rate in 1907 was 43 per 1,000 of population, more than four times the New Zealand rate,” not including 17 men and women lost at sea that year.^[2]

Gudgeon scapegoated Chinese migrants for introducing diseases and passed racist legislation to bar them from living in the islands. In fact, it was European colonists who were chiefly responsible for repeated epidemics and the lack of medical care.

The First World War was catastrophic for the Cook Islands. When Prime Minister William Massey’s government encountered widespread resistance to conscription in New Zealand, especially among Mʻori, recruiters turned to the Cook Islands and Niue. Mʻori members of parliament Apirana Ngata and Maui Pomare played a prominent role in recruiting the Pacific islanders, appealing to them as part of the same Polynesian race, to fight for the British Empire and New Zealand imperialism.

The Pacific soldiers sent to fight in Europe and the Middle East were particularly vulnerable to disease. Almost 500 men were sent from the Cook Islands, 5.8 percent of the population. It is estimated that 150 of them, 30 percent, died.

Samoa did not send troops, but was devastated by the 1918 influenza pandemic, introduced by a New Zealand vessel, which killed 8,500 people, 22 percent of the population. New Zealand provided grossly inadequate medical assistance. Its colonial administrator Colonel Robert Logan infamously replied to a request for help from a girls’ school by saying: “I do not care if they are going to die. Let them die and go to hell.” In the Cook Islands, only Rarotonga was affected by the virus, resulting in 45 deaths.

Soldiers who were told they were fighting for “freedom” returned home to the same despotic regime. In March 1919 dozens rioted in Rarotonga in protest against extortionate price inflation. Some refused to pay debts incurred before the war. The administration sentenced 12 people for rioting, five of whom were sent to New Zealand for five years’ hard labour.

During the Great Depression, the value of Cook Islands exports suddenly collapsed—by 1935 it was just one third of the 1925 figure—and the New Zealand government slashed its funding for the territory from £17,464 in fiscal year 1931-1932 to just £11,000, “enough to maintain only skeleton health services and impoverished schooling.”^[3]

New Zealand’s first Labour government (1935–1949), elected following explosive unemployed riots in Auckland and other cities, did not make any significant improvements. The welfare state reforms introduced in New Zealand to save capitalism from the threat of revolution, including improvements to healthcare, education and housing, did not reach the Cook Islands.

Petitions signed by thousands of islanders calling for democratic reforms, including a fully-elected council and representation in the New Zealand parliament, were dismissed.

During World War II, Cook Islanders were excluded from New Zealand’s military recruitment efforts, as the government feared a repeat of the unrest of 1919. Export income collapsed during the war and food prices soared by 50 percent. Driven by poverty, around 485 people signed up as indentured labourers in the phosphate mine on the French Polynesian island of Makatea—a scheme backed by the NZ government.

Workers on Makatea went on strike in February 1945 over the hellish conditions, which “included rotten accommodation in filthy, crowded barracks; lack of water; foul camp and cookhouse conditions; crudest of

sanitary arrangements; bad, monotonous and unhealthy food consisting almost entirely of poor bread and tea; lack of medical arrangements, facilities for recreation or any amenities.”^[4]

Industrial disputes escalated in the colony in the years after the war, led by the Cook Islands Progressive Association (CIPA), a political and industrial organisation founded in 1944, which had the support of some local fruit growers. The CIPA, which claimed 3,000 members by 1946, made limited appeals for democratic reform and better conditions for Cook Islands exporters, but did not oppose colonial rule.

The Labour government unsuccessfully tried to derail the CIPA and to prevent workers from organising outside the control of the NZ Federation of Labour. In 1948 the Federation’s vice-president, F. P. Walsh, a virulent anti-communist, personally intervened to shut down solidarity action by the crew of the Wairata steamer with striking Cook Islands waterside workers.

Walsh later declared contemptuously that “in the Cook Islands there can be no exploitation of native labour, such as exists in some other Pacific groups. In the main the Cook Islanders work cooperatively for themselves and, at a pinch, can live independently of money.”^[5]

In March 1948, the Labour government dispatched armed police to enforce the loading and unloading of ships against pickets. New Zealand colonial police were capable of brutal repression, most notoriously in Samoa, where on December 28, 1929, officers massacred 11 people at a peaceful demonstration.

Such atrocities were not repeated in the Cook Islands. Legislation was passed to allow strikers to be imprisoned for up to three months, but it was not invoked, and instead small fines were issued to about 20 strikers.

Repeated strikes by watersiders, fruit packers, nurses and other workers forced some improvement in wages. According to one account, however, “even after the increases, a labourer could get only one-third of the wages” paid in New Zealand.^[6]

During the late 1940s and the 1950s, amid the postwar economic upswing in New Zealand, a few concessions were made to improve living conditions in the Cook Islands. Healthcare and education services expanded and electricity infrastructure was installed on Rarotonga. Housing conditions remained dire and poverty was deeply entrenched. Infant mortality in 1962 was 48 per 1,000 births, more than double the New Zealand rate.

In 1959 the Cook Islands chief medical officer Dr J. R. MacPherson resigned because of the appalling conditions in the hospital, which he described as “clouded in flies... primitive and grossly overcrowded. There was no chance of isolating infectious cases, all were packed together.”^[7]

After failing to stop the growth of the CIPA, the Labour government changed tactics and sought to defuse the growing opposition to colonial rule by working directly with CIPA’s leader Albert Henry, who had moved to New Zealand and joined the Labour Party during the 1940s. The government loaned money to the CIPA to purchase its own cargo ship and support co-operative trading schemes, although these ventures were not very successful, and the CIPA became largely inactive.

The Cook Islands after self-government

When the Cook Islands was granted “internal self-government” in 1965—while still remaining a New Zealand colony—Albert Henry’s Cook Islands Party won the territory’s first election. Representing a small layer of indigenous capitalists, Henry’s administration and its successors sought to develop the islands as a tourism destination and as a source of cheap labour for New Zealand businesses.

At a ceremony in Rarotonga marking the start of the “self-government”

and “free association” period, New Zealand’s conservative prime minister Keith Holyoake stated that “citizens of the Cook Islands will still be citizens of New Zealand, entitled to the rights and the privileges and protections to which New Zealanders are entitled.”^[8]

Sixty years later, however, the majority of Cook Islanders living in New Zealand—along with Samoans, Tongans and other Pacific peoples—remain among the most exploited workers, employed predominantly in low-wage jobs such as meat processing, agricultural labour and the services industry.

After repeated waves of emigration to escape poverty, the Cooks’ population has collapsed from close to 21,000 in the early 1970s to about 15,000 today. There are 80,000 people of Cook Islands descent living in New Zealand and about 28,000 in Australia, vastly outnumbering those remaining in the islands.

In 2018, the median annual income for Cook Islands Māori in New Zealand was \$22,500, equivalent to 65 percent of the median income for Europeans (\$34,600). In the Cook Islands, meanwhile, the legal minimum wage is just \$9.50 an hour, compared with \$23.50 in New Zealand. The median income in Rarotonga in 2021 was \$18,000, while for the outer islands it was just \$11,000.

The Cook Islands economy, heavily dependent on tourism and foreign aid, has staggered from one crisis to the next. In 1996, the government declared bankruptcy, citing \$120 million in public debts; this was followed by 2,000 job cuts in the public service—about 10 percent of the population—which had a devastating impact and prompted thousands to leave the country.

When tourist numbers collapsed in 2020/2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the country’s GDP contracted by an extraordinary 23.2 percent.

While the majority of the population lives in poverty, a small elite has built up significant assets. Since the 1980s, successive Cook Islands governments have built up a lucrative financial services industry which transformed the country into a tax haven for the world’s ultra-rich to hide their billions. *Fortune* magazine reported last October that “After tourism, business related to offshore trusts is the country’s top economic driver.”

The Brown government maintains that it has no intention of cutting ties with New Zealand. Its agreements with China are part of increasingly desperate efforts to diversify the Cook Islands economy, raise revenue and protect the interests of the local capitalist class, as development aid and investment from New Zealand is increasingly unreliable.

New Zealand’s right-wing coalition government has responded to the global economic downturn with brutal austerity measures, impacting public services at home as well as foreign aid, which is forecast to fall from \$1.4 billion in 2024 to \$930 million in 2027.

The one area where the National Party-led government—fully supported by the Labour Party—aims to dramatically increase spending is on the military, as it integrates ever more closely into the US-led anti-China alliance. As was the case in World War II, the Pacific region is emerging as a key battleground in the next imperialist war for redivision of the world.

With increasing hysteria, the New Zealand ruling elite depicts Chinese economic investment and loans to the Pacific as a potential military threat, despite the fact that China has no military bases in the Pacific. It is the United States, Australia, New Zealand and their allies that are militarizing the entire Indo-Pacific region. In the past 20 years, New Zealand and Australia have carried out repeated military interventions in the Solomon Islands, East Timor and Tonga to defend their interests.

New Zealand’s navy and air force actively patrol the Cook Islands’ substantial exclusive economic zone, roughly 3,000 kilometres northeast of Auckland. The NZ Defence Force frequently visits the islands, providing “advisors” to the government and police, and running military training programs for young people.

The Cook Islands is also part of the Pacific Policing Initiative—led by

Australia and supported by the US and NZ—which will create a new multinational police force that can rapidly deploy anywhere in the Pacific. This imperialist-controlled unit will be used to violently suppress any popular opposition to social inequality and militarism—in the same way that thousands of French security forces were dispatched to occupy New Caledonia following last year’s riots.

The history of the Cook Islands contains vital lessons for the working class and oppressed peoples internationally. The promise of self-determination and democracy, under capitalism, has proven to be a mirage. All the impoverished Pacific island states, whether officially independent or not, remain completely dominated and exploited by the imperialist powers. Their populations are now being dragged into the growing vortex of a catastrophic third world war between nuclear-armed powers.

The existential problems facing the Cook Islands—climate change, poverty, pandemics and the approaching war—are of a global character and cannot be solved within the Cook Islands. Workers across the Pacific must unite with those in Australia, New Zealand and internationally, in a revolutionary movement to abolish capitalism and reorganise society along socialist lines. This will put an end to imperialist war and colonial oppression and provide the resources to eliminate poverty and inequality.

The urgent task is to build the necessary socialist leadership for the struggles that will inevitably erupt, by establishing sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, in every county in the Pacific.

Dick Scott, *Years of the Pooh-Bah: A Cook Islands History*, 1991, pages 90, 104.

Scott, 105.

Scott, 196.

“Have New Zealand subjects been sold into slavery?” *Challenge*, August 1945.

Quoted in Scott, 257.

R.A.K. Mason, *Frontier Forsaken*, 1947, page 95.

Scott, 282.

The Cook Islands Looks Ahead, documentary film, 1965.

[1] Dick Scott, *Years of the Pooh-Bah: A Cook Islands History*, 1991, pages 90, 104.

[2] Scott, 105.

[3] Scott, 196.

[4] “Have New Zealand subjects been sold into slavery?” *Challenge*, August 1945.

[5] Quoted in Scott, 257.

[6] R.A.K. Mason, *Frontier Forsaken*, 1947, page 95.

[7] Scott, 282.

[8] *The Cook Islands Looks Ahead*, documentary film, 1965.



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