

DR DAVID BEDGGOOD
*Senior lecturer in sociology at the
University of Auckland*

‘Recolonisation’ of the Pacific via ‘free’ trade

Big Brothers Behaving Badly: The implications for the Pacific Islands of the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations, report by Jane Kelsey commissioned by the Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG). April 2004.

JANE KELSEY has added to her long list of informative and critical publications this recent attack on Australia and New Zealand’s role in forcing free trade onto the small Pacific nations (www.arena.org.nz/bigbully.pdf). She accuses them of bullying these island states to remove tariffs, export subsidies and protectionist measures in agriculture, so they can sell more goods to Pacific Island consumers.

The main attack comes from PACER as a proposed regional free trade agreement in which Australia and NZ are the dominant partners. This agreement was signed in 2003

and locked the island states into talks to form a single regional ‘common’ market to begin by 2011 or earlier if agreements with other countries (eg EU) are begun. The second attack comes from the drive to get Samoa, Vanuatu and Tonga into the WTO.

Australia and NZ are following the lead of the US in refusing to allow these island states any special treatment in joining the WTO. They are demanding that they all reduce their tariffs to zero and remove all export subsidies. As Kelsey points out, in the case of Tonga’s agreement to remove \$NZ6 million worth of tariffs on NZ meat exports (mainly mutton flaps, a ‘fatty waste product’ that the WTO condemns as a health risk) this will amount to a cut of 40 per cent in state revenue to pay for services to a people made up of 80 per cent subsistence farmers who live mainly off money sent by relatives abroad.

Kelsey clearly sees Australia as the main bully with NZ tagging along, enforcing economic dominance in their ‘back yard’ to the exclusion of rivals like the EU, US and Japan. She is convinced that free trade agreements are a form of ‘recolonisation’ as they strip the sovereignty from weaker states to resist or manage the impact of the giant MNCs in the global economy on their vulnerable populations. The Pacific Island states are about as vulnerable as they get.

To get their way, Australian and NZ negotiators employed 'full frontal bullying', behaving like colonisers, 'shouting', 'berating' and 'intimidating'. Jim Sutton, NZ's trade minister took exception to these charges, claiming that the negotiators had 'behaved impeccably', and 'then let forth a stream of personal abuse that proved the point'. According to Kelsey:

This is not just a power grab by Australia and NZ for control of the South Pacific. As a World Bank report spelt out in 2002, PACER aims to lock the Pacific Islands irrevocably into the neoliberal paradigm...[t]he broader and deeper the liberalisation, the more 'structural adjustment' will be required (Kelsey, 2004).

What of the resistance that has been building to neo-liberal globalisation? Can the South Pacific be rescued in time? Like all other free trade deals, those impacting on the South Pacific have been largely done behind closed doors without any debate among the people whose lives will be affected. Kelsey's solution: 'The people – NGOs, social movements, trade unions, local businesses and the media – are powerful potential allies of Pacific Island governments in rejecting the neoliberal agenda and developing their own Pacific Plan to address the

serious challenges that are facing them.'

The difficulty Kelsey and other radical critics of free trade have in getting their own message out into the mainstream media controlled by corporations with a neo-liberal agenda. Kelsey quite often makes the *New Zealand Herald* op ed page and succeeds in drawing opposing opinion leaders into debate. On this issue, the profile seems to have been lower. *Herald* columnist Tapu Misa did a sympathetic piece about the 'brutish' trade negotiations that was picked up by *Pacific Media Watch* but seems not to have sparked any discussion. The iconoclastic online media resource Scoop.co.nz reproduced the report in full, as did a number of solidarity and NGO websites.

Kelsey also talked about the report at an ARENA forum held in Rotorua on June 7 alongside the Pacific Islands Forum economics ministers' meeting, but the forum seems to have been ignored by the mainstream media, although it was reported in the University of the South Pacific journalism students newspaper *Wansolwara* (Decloitre, 2004).

This level of dissemination shows that there is a radical constituency that can be reached, but the effective silencing of this issue in the mainstream media clearly reinforces the need to create an alternative counter-

hegemonic media owned and controlled by the anti-globalising forces able to get their message out to the masses.

Elsewhere, Kelsey has expanded on her strategy for self-determination and decolonisation.

...we are increasingly seeing social movements engaged in what, in traditional Gramscian terms, we would call a counter-hegemonic war of position. And they are having an international impact. For the reasons I have outlined, these movements are likely to be centred primarily in the South, alongside those, such as indigenous peoples, who constitute the South in the North. But there are important opportunities for us to forge alliances. For that to happen we must be able to transcend single-issue politics and to transcend eurocentric and patriarchal stereotypes of class. Any changes we achieve will only be truly transformational if political, economic and cultural decolonisation are seen as inseparable (Kelsey, 2003).

Specifically Kelsey sees social movements like the World Social Forum, the poor farmers union, Via Campesina and global trade unions like the International Union of Food, Agricultural and Allied Workers (IUF), as the leading forces in this counter-hegemonic struggle. She could also point to the recent emer-

gence of the unemployed movement in Argentina, and the miners and peasants of Bolivia.

For this reviewer, the promise of these latter movements is that they forge alliances in the heat of the struggle capable of bringing down governments who are complicit not only in the broad neo-liberal global agenda, but particularly in protecting the private ownership of the vital resources of these nations. In stopping this right wing agenda in the South Pacific, it will be necessary for social movements inside Australia and NZ to link up with the people of the Island states to form an alliance not only against free trade, but also against global capitalism.

References

- Decloitre, S. (2004, June 11). Colonialism well and alive in the Pacific: Kelsey Wansolwara Online.
www.usp.ac.fj/journ/wansolnews/2004/june/wansol1106041.html
- Kelsey, J. (2004). *Acceding Countries as Pawns in a Power Play: a case study of the Pacific Islands*.
www.arena.org.nz/pacwto.htm
- Kelsey, J. (2003). *Recolonisation or decolonisation – where does our future lie? Fourth Bruce Jesson Lecture*, 17 November 2003.
www.gpja.pl.net/sub/education/BJF.pdf
- Misa, T. (2004, April 4). Pacific 'free' trade negotiations nasty, brutish and rude. *New Zealand Herald*.

