

Deepening frustrations among Pacific Island nations over climate inaction

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The UN Climate Change Conference, COP29, held in Baku, Azerbaijan from November 11-22, took place as 2024 heads towards the hottest year in human history. Temperatures are expected to be 1.5 °C (2.7 °F) above pre-industrial levels this year, which is considered a critical point beyond which climate change will become much more severe.

The WSWs noted it was the third consecutive year that the ostensibly highest political meeting to fight climate change was held in a country that has non-renewable fossil fuels as its main export, following summits in the United Arab Emirates (2023) and Egypt (2022). Predictably, it produced yet another empty agreement.

The COP charade has again, as the WSWs explained, exposed “the inability of the world’s capitalist governments to abate rising greenhouse gas emissions and combat the ongoing and accelerating ecological crisis caused by global warming.”

The UN meeting concluded with a new global climate finance goal with rich nations pledging a \$US300 billion annual target by 2035. The figure is well short of what developing nations were asking for: over \$US1 trillion in assistance.

One of the regions most impacted by global warming is the Pacific. According to the Pacific Islands Climate Action Network (PICAN), a group of climate advocacy organisations, COP29 “once again ignored” the region. It called the outcome “a catastrophic failure to meet the scale of the crisis, leaving vulnerable nations to face escalating risks with little support.”

PICAN accused the richest nations of having “turned their backs on their legal and moral obligations.” The pledged finance represents little more than a long-promised \$US100 billion target adjusted for inflation and relied “heavily on loans rather than grants, pushing developing nations further into debt.” Nor did it address “the growing costs of adaptation, mitigation, and loss and damage faced by vulnerable nations.”

Frustration has been growing for some time in Pacific

nations over the failure of successive summits. For COP26, held in Glasgow in 2021, Tuvalu’s then Foreign Minister Simon Kofe recorded a speech standing knee-deep in seawater to illustrate that “bold action” was needed in the island nation’s struggle against rising sea levels.

Papua New Guinea, the Pacific’s largest and most populous nation, boycotted COP29 in protest over “empty promises and inaction.” Foreign Minister Justin Tkatchenko said that “despite contributing little to the global climate crisis, countries like PNG are left grappling with its severe impacts.” Tkatchenko pointed to immense difficulties accessing climate finance from the COP. PNG’s government has blamed climate change for a devastating landslide, which killed at least 670 people in May.

The summit’s resolution was bulldozed through over significant objections and, on the penultimate evening, without letting some countries that had requested to speak take the floor. India objected to the adoption of the statement along with Nigeria and Malawi. Cuba and Pakistan also called out the low target as inadequate for meeting the needs of developing countries.

The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) that work together on climate change at one point walked out after dismissing an offer of \$US250 billion from richer countries. AOSIS chair, Samoa’s Environment Minister Cedric Schuster said: “We cannot be expected to agree to a text which shows such contempt for our vulnerable people.”

The AOSIS eventually caved in and approved the statement, despite its calls for more “ambitious” action. Schuster noted the new finance goal would only “serve to kickstart” mitigation efforts and called for “transformational change” to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees in line with the 2016 Paris Agreement.

Vanuatu will this month take a case, some 5 years in preparation, to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague, seeking an advisory opinion on climate change and human rights. Ralph Regenvanu, Vanuatu’s Special Envoy for Climate Change and Environment, said “the lack of

progress at UN climate change talks in lowering emissions and slowing down climate change—despite the Paris Agreement— necessitates legal action.”

UN Secretary-General António Guterres, opening the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) summit in Tonga last August, described the Pacific as “the most vulnerable area of the world.” He said there is “an enormous injustice... The small islands don’t contribute to climate change but everything that happens because of climate change is multiplied here.”

Low-lying atolls and islands such as Kiribati, Tuvalu and Vanuatu are already experiencing extreme weather events and hurricanes, regular flooding, coastal erosion, food insecurity and water contamination. Fiji has begun relocating as many as 42 coastal villages inland. Some 62 percent of the region’s critical health facilities are situated within 500 metres of vulnerable coastlines.

The local imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, which regularly invoke their leadership of the so-called “Pacific family,” treat the impoverished island nations with neo-colonial contempt. Pacific representatives at COP29 openly criticised the Australian government’s plans for a massive gas industry expansion in Western Australia, saying it could result in 125 times more greenhouse gas emissions than the island nations release in a year.

Regenvanu said Australia was “not acting in good faith” when it promoted its climate credentials. “As the world’s third largest fossil fuel exporter, the Australian government is exporting climate destruction overseas, including to Pacific nations like Vanuatu, who experience the most devastating impacts of the climate crisis, despite contributing the least,” he said.

Australia’s Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has stated that the country will ramp up its extraction and use of gas until “2050 and beyond.” The Labor government recently approved the expansion of three thermal coal mines that could generate more than 1.3 billion tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions in their lifetime.

Calls at virtually every PIF summit for urgent meaningful action are inevitably stymied by Canberra. At the 2019 PIF summit, Australia’s then Prime Minister Scott Morrison refused to commit to measures limiting temperature rises to no more than 1.5 degrees. In 2022, Fiji and Palau called on Australia to set more ambitious reduction targets; Albanese flatly dismissed the call as “hypothetical.”

Under a cynical neo-colonial pact signed last year with Tuvalu, Australia will offer eventual residency to Tuvalu’s population of 10,600, at a rate of just 280 a year, as “climate refugees” displaced by global warming. In exchange for this token refugee intake, Canberra gets sweeping powers over Tuvalu’s defence, policing, border protection, cyber security and critical infrastructure. The deal is part of Australia’s

contribution to militarising the Pacific amid US-led preparations for war with China.

In New Zealand, two unpopular minor far-right parties—NZ First and ACT—in the National Party-led coalition government have expressed scepticism about the science of climate change. Both stood in the 2023 election promising to do away with “virtue signalling” climate policies. ACT wants to scrap the existing Zero Carbon Act and the previous Labour government’s policy of halving net emissions by 2030 compared with 2005 levels.

NZ First MP and regional development minister Shane Jones provocatively posted on X: “We are not going to be guilt-tripped by those fanciful accounts that the planet is boiling. We need NZ’s natural resources.” Thirty-six mining projects have already been given fast-tracked consents, while one of Jones’ key targets is to reverse the existing ban on oil and gas drilling.

Seeking to differentiate China from the US and its allies, President Xi Jinping met with Samoa’s Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata’afa during her visit to Beijing last week and declared China—which is itself a major emitter—would make “empowering Pacific Island countries to tackle climate change a priority.” China would work with Pacific countries, Xi said, “to promote the full and effective implementation” of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement.

Fighting climate change, however, is a global issue requiring global solutions that will cut across the financial and geopolitical interests of the capitalist elites in every country, large and small. Nor can the climate crisis be resolved in the shadow of a catastrophic war between nuclear armed powers. Avoiding ecological disaster requires a worldwide movement of the working class to abolish the profit system and replace it with socialism.



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