

## **Australia takes Pacific gives on PACER Plus**

**Pacific Trade Ministers have conceded to many of the demands of Australia and New Zealand at the 2009 Forum Trade Ministers Meeting held in Apia, Samoa, this week.**

Australia and New Zealand pushed hard for a recommendation to launch negotiations for a new free trade agreement (PACER-Plus) when Australia hosts the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting in Cairns in August.

Pacific Ministers had originally proposed a timeline that would allow for national consultations and research regarding PACER-Plus prior to negotiations, which were tentatively scheduled for 2013. Yesterday however they agreed to launching negotiations in August.

Coordinator of the Pacific Network on Globalisation, Maureen Penjueli said the turn around from trade ministers was a significant departure from positions held just six months ago. "Ministers need to explain how and when national consultations and research into the impacts of a PACER-Plus agreement will take place, said Ms Penjueli. "Pacific countries still need the time for these processes to take place before formal negotiations begin." She said the onus was now on Pacific Ministers to ensure an adequate timeframe for negotiations during the next Forum Trade Ministers' Meeting, scheduled for November in the Federated States of Micronesia.

"Civil society organisations, church groups and trade unions from around the region are very concerned about the implications of a free trade deal with Australia and New Zealand," said Ms Penjueli. "None of their concerns about a loss of government revenue, displacement of jobs, or social impacts have been addressed by this decision."

Initial reports from the meeting indicate that Australia and New Zealand also pushed Pacific countries to limit the role of a regional office that would guide the Pacific during negotiations - the Office of the Chief Trade Advisor (OCTA). Whilst the OCTA may now be funded from sources other than Australia and New Zealand, it will have a limited ability to undertake national research and support capacity building for the Pacific to negotiate PACER-Plus.

Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network (AFTINET) campaigner, Adam Wolfenden, said the reduced capacity of the Office of Chief Trade Advisor means that the Pacific will now be in a much worse position to access research and support to make informed decisions regarding PACER-Plus.

"The danger now that Pacific countries have agreed to enter negotiations, is that Australia and New Zealand already have that existing capacity as well as a set agenda for PACER-Plus," said Adam Wolfenden. "They will now demand a reciprocal free trade agreement that would prise open Pacific markets for their exports, their investors and their corporations."

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Pacific Network on Globalisation and the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network (AFTINET).