

Fiji's coup crisis continues

# What has happened to the voice of the working class?

**Mike Head**  
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It is now nearly five weeks since a desperate and failed businessman, George Speight, led a motley crew of thugs and military personnel to seize the Fijian parliament and take hostage Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and most of his cabinet.

More than a month on from May 19, Speight and his supporters are still holding court in Suva, staging farcical negotiations with the armed forces chiefs, who have openly expressed sympathy with their racist demands, proclaimed martial law and revoked the Constitution. Under the military's rule, political meetings, protests and strikes have been outlawed.

For now, the military commanders have rejected Speight's demand to be included in a new government—fearing popular unrest as well as international isolation. But they are working with Speight's backers to instal an unelected bankers' government to be headed, it seems, by Laisenia Qarase, general manager of the Merchants Bank and former managing director of the Fiji Development Bank. Reportedly, Qarase's cabinet would include an ex-Governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji, a former army commander and two prominent Indo-Fijian businessmen.

Far from being treated as terrorists, Speight and his hoodlums have been assured of immunity, some role in the proposed military-backed administration and a part in drafting a new Constitution designed to keep power in ethnic Fijian hands.

Moreover, their gangs continue to roam freely as they terrorise Indian families and opponents of their takeover. Under the full gaze of the military authorities, hundreds of Indo-Fijians have become virtual refugees in their own country.

The working people of Fiji—indigenous and Indo-Fijian alike—have not only been deprived of their fundamental democratic and trade union rights but are also being plunged further into poverty as the economy grinds to a halt, destroying their jobs and livelihoods.

The longer this bizarre and reactionary “coup” goes on, the more the question is raised: what has happened to the voice of the working class, one of the strongest and most militant in the South Pacific?

Why has no mass movement emerged to challenge Speight and his hooligans? Why is the widespread opposition to Speight being diverted and dissipated in various directions—western and northern secessionist moves, business-backed lobbies, supplicant vigils and prayer meetings and passive petition campaigns?

Among many working people there is deep hostility toward Speight's coup. Key sections of workers and teachers are refusing to return to work while Speight continues to hold the hostages. Sugar farmers and labourers are boycotting the crucial sugar cane harvest, defying army threats of prosecution under martial law.

Furthermore, the working class carries considerable social weight in Fiji. By one recent estimate, 80 to 90 percent of the country's 800,000 people are workers, small farmers, villagers or unemployed. In the garment and other industries, workers of all ethnic origins work side-by-side.

Most of the ethnic Indians—nearly half Fiji's population—trace their ancestry to the 60,000 indentured labourers brought from India between 1874 and 1920 by the British colonial authorities and the Australian-owned Colonial Sugar Refining company to toil in the sugar cane plantations. After World War II, a multiracial working class emerged in the sugar industry, mines, factories, public service and waterfront.

A unified movement of workers and oppressed against Speight and the military, fighting for full democratic rights and decent living conditions for all, would rapidly cut the ground from beneath the racials.

But the Labour Party and trade union leaders have opposed any such mobilisation. The Fiji Trade Union Congress (FTUC) quickly called off a partial national strike on May 23 and has repeatedly postponed plans for a further stoppage, claiming that it is not necessary. FTUC secretary general Felix Anthony criticised the military takeover on May 29 but has also held “cordial” negotiations with Commodore Frank Bainimarama, urging the martial law commander to find a settlement within the confines of the 1997 Constitution.

The last thing the Labour and union leaders want is a militant class-based mass movement, because the demands, needs and aspirations of working people would soon come into conflict with their entire economic program, which is based on implementing the requirements of the employers and global financial markets.

Chaudhry's “People's Coalition” government was an alliance between the Labour Party and ethnic Fijian nationalist groupings—the Fijian Association Party, the Party of National Unity and the Christian Democratic Alliance. Promising to stem worsening mass unemployment and poverty, it was swept into office in May 1999 in a landslide vote against the 1987 military

coup leader, Sitiveni Rabuka.

But it soon demonstrated its commitment to satisfying the demands of business. After objections from Australian- and Asian-owned garment employers—who pay their workers an average of just F\$60 (US\$30) a week—the government backed away from its promised poverty-line minimum wage of F\$120 (US\$60) a week. Instead the Labour leaders proposed tripartite discussions with employers and unions to agree on a “liveable wage”.

Before it was removed, Chaudhry's government had already come into conflict with sections of the working class. One of its last acts before Speight's coup was to denounce and threaten legal action against striking nurses.

Faced with chronic understaffing and a flight of nurses overseas, the country's 1,300 nurses had demanded an annual starting salary of F\$13,000 (US\$6,711), an increase of F\$4,000. After four months of failed negotiations between their union leaders and the Chaudhry government, the nurses walked out on strike on May 12.

Chaudhry and his ministers slandered the strikers as being part of a politically-orchestrated move by Rabuka's Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) party to bring the government to its knees. The government declared the strike illegal and organised strikebreakers. After two-and-a-half days the nurses returned to work with only a small pay increase.

Behind these attacks on the working class lay the commitment of the “People's Coalition” to implement the policies laid down by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Executive Board in October 1998.

In its review of the Fijian economy, the IMF noted a sharp fall in investment rates, from 25 percent during 1980-85 (before Rabuka's 1987 coup) to less than 13 percent in recent years. It criticised Rabuka's government for making “only limited headway on key structural issues that are hampering investment” and declared that “decisive action on many fronts could no longer be postponed”.

Among the IMF's key “reform” prescriptions were “wage restraint,” the acceleration of privatisation, complete financial and economic deregulation and “the need to curtail discretionary and unproductive spending and to reduce the public sector wage bill”.

These prescriptions formed the basis of the Chaudhry government's program.

The response of the unions to Speight's coup is reminiscent of the role they played during Rabuka's ouster of the short-lived Labour Party-led government of Timoci Bavadra 13 years ago. While they have worked to prevent any general mobilisation of the working class, they have appealed for intervention by the major capitalist powers to restore “law and order”.

In 1987 there was strong opposition to the military dictatorship among working people, both in Fiji and throughout the region. Fiji's sugar farmers and mill labourers refused to work, crippling much of the economy. Australian workers imposed bans that halted virtually all Fijian trade and travel—until the bans were called off at the insistence of the Hawke Labor government.

Rabuka was able to succeed largely because Bavadra, his finance minister Chaudhry and the union leaders opposed any movement that would threaten the vested interests of business. They ended the sugar boycott, sought to maintain their coalition with Indian business owners via the National Federation Party, and called for

“national reconciliation”. Once released from military custody, Bavadra effectively accepted the ouster of his government and volunteered to serve on a council of advisers formed by the Governor-General.

During the mid-1990s, the Labour and FTUC leaders joined with the colonial and regional powers, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, to draft a new, slightly modified version of Rabuka's racist 1990 Constitution. The resulting 1997 Constitution retained racially-designated parliamentary seats and the wide-ranging veto powers of the Great Council of Chiefs. But it made the regime more palatable to investors by weakening the grip of Rabuka's cronies and carpetbaggers like Speight.

Once again, the Labour and FTUC leaders are appealing to these powers for support. Both “Peoples Coalition” and FTUC officials have sent submissions to the British Commonwealth, calling for sanctions and military intervention. On June 5 FTUC general secretary Anthony sent a message to the Commonwealth ministerial meeting in London, declaring that Fijian workers “cherish” the 1997 Constitution, which he described as the product of five years of “consensus building”. Warning of a “total breakdown of law and order” if the Chaudhry government were not reinstated, Anthony called on the Commonwealth to prepare to deploy a “stabilising/peacekeeping force”.

These are the same powers that have plundered the economic and human resources of the country for more than a century. Australian interests, notably banks, finance houses, tourism operators, and sugar, garment and mining companies, now control much of the economy. Any military force will be dedicated to their protection, not to defending the political rights or living standards of the Fijian masses.

During the five years of “consensus building” to which Anthony refers, Australian and other international clothing firms have taken advantage of the extensive tax holidays initiated by Rabuka to establish Fiji as a cheap labour platform. In garment and other factories, Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian women work together under appalling conditions—long shifts with minimal breaks, irregular hours, constant surveillance and no basic rights. Even talking is banned during working hours.

The experiences of the past 13 years have revealed the complete subservience of the Labor and trade union leaders to international finance capital and the local ruling elite. Both the Labor Party and the FTUC bear responsibility for creating the conditions where the fundamental democratic rights of the Fijian working class have come under increasing attack by racist thugs and the military.



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