

Canberra dictates terms in Solomon Islands pay dispute

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The direct intervention of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) into a major pay dispute involving public servants has once again exposed the neo-colonial character of the Australian-led operation in the small Pacific nation. Canberra formally insists that the Solomon Islands remains an independent, sovereign country despite the presence of hundreds of mainly Australian troops, police and officials. In reality, it exercises broad powers in the country's internal economic and political matters.

In mid-January, the Solomon Islands government authorised a pay rise for the country's public servants in order to defuse a threatened national strike. The increase of just 2.5 percent backdated to 2003 and an 8 percent Cost of Living Adjustment backdated to 2002 failed to compensate for levels of inflation that reached over 15 percent last year. Workers have not received a wage increase for 10 years.

Within days, however, RAMSI Special Coordinator Nick Warner, a senior Australian diplomat, stepped in to undermine the decision. Speaking on the *Talking Truth* radio program, he warned that the pay rise would jeopardise government finances and detract from efforts to rebuild the health and education sectors. In a thinly veiled threat, he declared that the pay dispute was a real test of the unity between the government and RAMSI and could undermine international economic assistance to the country.

Australian High Commissioner to Solomon Islands Patrick Cole summoned Clement Waiwori, president of the Solomon Islands Council of Trade Unions and general secretary of the Solomon Islands Public Employees Union, for a meeting on 19 January. According to Waiwori, Cole did not directly threaten to withdraw Australian aid to the cash-strapped country, but reiterated Warner's comments that the wage rise

would give "a negative signal" to aid donors. Another RAMSI representative delivered a similar message to Waiwori a day later.

So blatant was Canberra's intrusion into the pay case that the Australian Council of Trades Unions (ACTU) felt compelled to make mild criticisms. ACTU president Sharan Burrow issued a press release declaring: "To have a diplomatic representative from another country intervene in the process of industrial rights and responsibilities in this direct way is not just unfortunate, it's actually not acceptable. It certainly demonstrates that Australia has a view about its role in the Pacific that we think is unhealthy."

The ACTU has, however, taken no action to oppose this "unhealthy" development. Like the Labor Party opposition, the trade union bureaucracy backed the Australian-led military intervention on the pretext that it was necessary to help the people of the "failed state". Far from being motivated by humanitarian concerns, Canberra's dispatch of troops, police and officials last July was part of far broader plans to assert Australian hegemony in what Australian Prime Minister John Howard termed "our patch" in the South Pacific.

While Australia's involvement may initially have raised hopes in the Solomons, there are signs of growing hostility as Solomon Islanders start to recognise that Canberra has no intention of rebuilding social services and lifting living standards. As elsewhere in the Pacific, Australia is pushing for economic restructuring measures that include drastic cutbacks to government spending and privatisations. The number of employees in the public sector—the country's largest employer—has already been halved over the last decade.

A letter from a "concerned citizen" to the Solomon Island Broadcasting Commission on January 22 pointed

out that the wage rise for public servants was tiny. For a Level 3 public servant it amounted to an increase of just \$8 a fortnight. An Australian receiving the minimum wage earns in one day the same as a Level 4 public servant in the Solomon Islands receives in two weeks. The letter pointed out that financial assistance from Australia and other donors is not used to improve the social position of the local population but to pay the salary of various RAMSI advisers and Australian companies supplying goods to Solomon Islands.

In late January, an Australian firm contracted to RAMSI imposed a 30 percent pay cut on its workers. Patrick Defense Logistics provides accommodation, meals, maintenance, transport and other support activities for other foreign personnel at two bases set up at Honiara's Henderson Field Airport. A company spokesman Felicity Moffatt declared dismissively that while pay had been cut, it was higher than the going rate in Honiara. Patrick is notorious in Australia for its ruthless restructuring methods.

On February 8, Solomon Islands commentator John Roughan pointed to the growing anger among Solomon Islanders. "Poverty levels haven't changed much and if truth be known, have dropped even further from already low levels. People's pockets remain empty with little hope that at any time soon they will gain much. Not that poverty reduction and job creation were in RAMSI's job description but for people who don't have much and live on less, there was a fond hope that the basic life of before would not only return but be better as well.

"Public servants seek a tiny wage increase ... a 2.5 percent addition in their pay packet. RAMSI's reaction is to immediately wheel out the 'big guns'—diplomatic pressure, political leaning on union leadership and threats to review the nation's aid package. Patrick, the Australian service provider for the military camps out at Henderson airfield, which made a \$800 million dollar, profit last year, is even more harsh. RAMSI's camp cooks, cleaners and general clean-up people, mostly women, are curtly informed that their take home pay will be slashed from \$70 a day to \$32. No dialogue, no discussion, no compromise . . . just a 'take it or leave it' attitude."

According to the last media reports, the public sector pay dispute is still unresolved. RAMSI officials have called for a new Memorandum of Understanding

between the government and the unions which defers any pay increases until 2005. Well aware where real power lies, public sector union leaders have been seeking talks, not with the government, but with RAMSI officials to voice their opposition.



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