

Fiji: Public sector workers vote to strike despite military regime's threats

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16 April 2007

Fijian civil servants voted to strike last month against the military junta's proposed 5 percent pay cut and elimination of thousands of public sector jobs through the reduction of the retirement age from 60 to 55. While the strike ballots reveal mounting working class opposition toward the administration's pro-investment economic agenda, the trade unions are doing everything in their power to cut a deal with the regime and avoid industrial action.

Since it seized power last December, the military led by Commodore Frank Bainimarama has appealed for international support by promising to implement economic and social measures demanded by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Last month the regime delivered an austerity budget that reduced government spending by \$F200 million (\$US120 million), and upheld earlier spending cuts in last November's austerity budget, drawn up by the ousted government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. The cuts were directed aimed against the working class, with health and education spending particularly affected, and public sector employees' jobs and salaries attacked.

The military junta has relied on its allies in the Labour Party and the unions to dissipate opposition among workers. Senior Labour figures have joined the government. Former Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry is now finance minister, and ex-deputy Labour leader Poseci Bune minister for public service and public service reform. Both figures bear direct responsibility for the junta's attacks on the jobs and conditions of Fijian public servants.

The unions are no less complicit. Tacitly welcoming the coup, the union bureaucracy took no action in defence of democratic rights, even as the military closed the parliament, imposed emergency rule, and

detained and assaulted political opponents.

Several union bureaucrats have since been installed in lucrative positions. Fiji Trades Union Congress (FTUC) national secretary Felix Anthony, for example, was recently appointed chairman of Telecom Fiji's board of directors. Anthony condemned public sector workers for considering striking, saying the FTUC "believed that jumping up and down was not the answer to the problems being faced by the public servants".

Public sector union officials—clearly more sensitive to the mood among ordinary workers—held the strike ballots in order to be seen to be doing something against the junta's planned cuts. Members of the Fiji Public Service Association were the first to vote for industrial action, with 92 percent in favour. The nurses', teachers' and air traffic controllers' unions also recorded large majorities for strike action.

The unions have nevertheless delayed taking any action and hope to avert strikes. "We have always said our doors are open for dialogue because for us, taking strike action is the last option and it's never a pleasure," Fiji Teachers Union general secretary Agni Deo Singh, a Labour MP in the deposed parliament, declared last month.

Representatives of the Fijian Teachers Association, Public Employees Union and the Viti Union of Taukei Workers attempted to negotiate a compromise with Labour Minister Bernadette Rounds-Ganilau on April 11. "I am very pleased with the discussions but I will not be able to reveal details because of the confidential nature of the meeting," Rounds-Ganilau declared.

The military has made clear it is willing to utilise repressive measures against workers if the Labour Party and unions prove unable to maintain control. The strike ballots were conducted under a barrage of threats and intimidation, with the country under emergency law

and all strikes illegal. Military spokesman Major Neumi Leweni last month warned that soldiers were monitoring the movements of members of the Fiji Public Service Association and Fiji Teachers Union.

Bainimarama has accused workers of “destabilising” the military’s efforts and harming the recovery of the Fijian economy, and threatened to extend the draconian emergency decree if workers strike. “Our country is suffering from increased unemployment and underemployment, decline in production and investment, continued emigration because of race-based policies and growing poverty and inequality,” he declared on March 19.

The junta has also threatened to sack any workers who strike, and warned that soldiers will be used to fill positions left vacant during industrial action.

The military has arbitrarily arrested a number of unionists. On March 22 Public Employees Union general secretary Pita Delana was detained at a military camp for two hours and questioned after he criticised the regime. Police closed down the annual general meeting of the National Union of Public Workers (NUPW) on March 28, using the pretext that the union did not have a permit to conduct the meeting. NUPW president Mosese Sova indicated the depth of anger among his members. “I told the police officers that I did not have the courage to stop the meeting because members had travelled from all over the country to attend.” Sova and a union lawyer were questioned and held for two hours at Suva’s central police station.

Whatever the outcome of the strike threats, opposition among ordinary Fijian workers will only intensify. Fiji’s economy is in deep recession, with gross domestic product expected to further contract by 2.5 percent this year. The assault on the jobs and conditions of public sector workers will exacerbate poverty, unemployment, and social inequality. Fiji’s traditional sugar and textiles industries have been in crisis for several years, and few employment opportunities exist outside the low-paid and menial jobs created by tourist resorts catering for overseas visitors.

A recent Citizens Constitutional Forum report revealed that 12 percent of Fiji’s population live in squatter settlements. The dwellings are makeshift and frequently squalid. Most squatters lack basic amenities such as piped water, electricity and sewerage. Residents have no security of tenure as they have no legal title to

their homes. The author of the report, Father Kevin Barr, pointed to recent unrest in the Solomon Islands, East Timor and Tonga, and warned that in Fiji the growth in poverty was creating a no less explosive social time bomb.



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