Fiji's nurses strike in defiance of military junta

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Fiji Nursing Association (FNA) members went on strike on July 25 to oppose a 5 percent pay cut and the axing of jobs by the lowering of the retirement age from 60 to 55 across the public sector. The nurses' union leadership was compelled to call the strike despite concerted threats from the country's military regime and the capitulation of most other public sector unions to the junta's dictates.

The 1,676 nurses left only a skeleton staff to cater for emergencies. The nurses want the full restoration of the 5 percent pay cut. That the strike has occurred at all expresses widespread hostility to the junta's austerity measures, which have placed the brunt of the nation's economic crisis on the backs of working people.

Nurses are part of the country's working poor and the pay cut is having a devastating impact on their already straitened living standards. In the 17 years to 2004, 65 percent of Fiji's nurses, including many senior staff, left the country to get a better job abroad.

The country's health system confronts an overall shortage of doctors, a lack of protective equipment and basic facilities. A striking nurse told the *Fiji Sun* on July 28: "Life as a nurse is so difficult and today we have to show the country how important our role is and that without us, the hospitals cannot run."

In a bid to demonstrate its fiscal responsibility and woo foreign investors, the junta slashed government spending by $F200 million ($US120 million) in a revised budget in March. Coup leader Commodore Frank Bainimarama is heavily dependent on Labour Party figures in his ministry and their connections with the trade union apparatus to impose the measures.

Labour leader Mahendra Chaudhry is the finance minister and drew up the budget. Former Labour deputy leader Poseci Bune is public service minister, in charge of imposing the pay and job cuts. Most of the public sector unions have refused launch industrial action over the budget, despite strike ballots in favour of action.

On July 11, the Confederation of Public Sector Unions (CPSU) agreed to an offer to restore just 1 percent of the cut pay. The FNA, along with the Fiji Public Service Association and the Fiji Teachers Union, also accepted the offer and agreed not to strike, but later pulled out of the agreement. FNA general secretary Kuini Lutua said her members were "very unhappy with the 1 percent restoration".

Determined to defeat the nurses' strike, Bune told the *Fiji Times*: "[T]he government cannot afford this and it cannot treat nurses differently from the rest of the civil service." The regime has mobilised police against picketing workers. All police have been placed on 12-hour shifts and leave has been cancelled. On July 20, the military and police held exercises that were broadcast on national television as a means of intimidating the nurses.

On July 24, the *Fiji Sun* published the junta's contingency plan, which includes threats to impose the Public Order Act that bans any public assembly. Any worker who strikes for more than seven days would be considered as having resigned their job. On July 28, six striking nurses on Taveuni were forcibly evicted from state-supplied residence by out of uniform police. One of the nurses protested: "They were really rude and used dirty words on us."

The government is obviously fearful that a protracted strike by nurses could attract support from other sections of workers and become a focus for political opposition. Bainimarama warned last week: "[P]eople who are going on strike for political reasons will be dealt with severely." For its part, the FNA leadership is determined to limit the campaign. General secretary

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Lutua told AAP the union did not "follow any political party because they [nurses] have always lost out in the end when politics comes in".

In a July 24 editorial, the *Fiji Sun* noted the dangers posed for the regime: "[If] the nurses are able to force the government back to the negotiating table with an offer the country cannot afford, the prognosis for Fiji is probably worse. For there are bodies of workers watching the progress of this strike and any sign of weakness will be noted and acted upon."

Rather than turning to other layers of working people, the FNA leadership is appealing for Bainimarama to intervene. Lutua told *Fijilive.com* on July 26: "We are thinking of negotiating our demands with the government but as yet nothing has been decided."

Other trade unions have isolated the FNA. The Fiji Islands Council of Trade Unions (FICTU) is holding meetings with the junta to find a means of calling off strike action scheduled for August 2. Viti National Union of Taukei Workers general secretary Taniela Tabu told the media: "No one wants the strike to go ahead and we are ready to negotiate with the government."

Bune praised the FICTU's demands as realistic, saying "They (were) taking into account the government's financial position." On July 26, Chaudhry said the government didn't have the money and appealed to the nurses to "go back to work" and "continue the dialogue".

The unions have tacitly supported the junta since Bainimarama seized power last December. No union leader opposed the coup or the increasingly repressive measures used to silence any criticism. The army has arbitrarily arrested and physically abused opponents. At least two individuals have died after being detained by soldiers.

The economy confronts a crisis. The Reserve Bank of Fiji announced on July 27 that GDP is expected to contract by 3.1 percent this year, up from an earlier estimate of 2.5 percent. Tourism, one of the country's main income earners, has declined, with arrivals for the year to April down 4 percent compared to the same period a year ago. The Fiji Islands Visitors Bureau expects an overall decline of 5.7 percent in tourism for 2007.

Inflation is around 7.1 percent, up from an earlier 3.5 percent projection. Working people and the unemployed have been the hardest hit by rising prices, particularly for food. These deteriorating living standards, as well as the junta's ruthless methods, are fuelling the growing opposition to the military regime.

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