

Fiji: Public sector workers strike against junta's austerity measures

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In defiance of threats by the Fijian military regime, more than 10,000 government workers began an indefinite strike on August 2. The strikers are members of the Public Employees Union (PEU), Fijian Teachers Association (FTA) and the Viti National Union of Taukei Workers (NUTW)—all affiliates of the Fiji Islands Council of Trade Unions (FICTU).

The strikers joined more than 1,600 nurses who walked out on July 25 over the same issues—the government's budget decision to cut the pay of public sector workers by 5 percent and axe jobs by lowering the retirement age from 60 to 55. In the small Pacific island state of just less than a million people, the strikers represent a significant section of the organised workforce.

The strikes went ahead despite backroom deals struck by public sector unions. This testifies to the deep-seated hostility of workers to the deterioration of living standards and essential services, as well as the anti-democratic methods of the interim government established by Commodore Frank Bainimarama, who seized power last December.

On July 11, the Confederation of Public Sector Unions (CPSU) agreed to an offer to restore just 1 percent of the cut pay. The Fiji Nursing Association (FNA), along with the Fiji Public Service Association and the Fiji Teachers Union, also accepted the offer but, faced with rank-and-file opposition, were later forced to pull out of the agreement.

Up to the last minute, FICTU leaders were seeking a meeting with the junta to find a means for calling off the strike. NUTW general secretary Taniela Tabu told the media last week: "No one wants the strike to go ahead and we are ready to negotiate with the government."

The walk-out by FICTU members delivered a blow to the military regime's efforts to intimidate the striking nurses. Bainimarama warned last week of severe action against anyone "going on strike for political reasons". The threat was made as televised broadcasts showed heavily-armed riot police and soldiers conducting mock crowd control exercises, in which shots were fired.

Just a day before the public sector workers stopped work, the NUTW's Tabu was arrested in a joint police-military dawn raid on his home after he called for the sacking of Finance Minister Mahendra Chaudhry on national television.

Tabu later told the media he was punched before being ordered to strip to his undergarments then made to run around in drizzling rain. He alleged he was beaten during interrogation at Queen Victoria Barracks and told he would be killed if arrested again. He claimed a similar threat had been directed at union officials Attar Singh and Tevita Koroi. Bainimarama warned that the joint military-police operations team would continue to detain people for questioning if they made "inciteful comments".

The coup leader also warned that strikers would be arrested if they picketed in public places without a permit. He deemed teachers to be still on strike even though they had suspended their action after the government brought forward scheduled school holidays by a week. Bainimarama declared teachers would not be paid holiday leave. During the strike, teachers from schools in Suva rallied outside the union headquarters after the regime banned all picketing outside public schools. The FTA said teachers would strike again if nothing transpired during the two-week school break.

Education Minister Netani Sukanaivalu announced he was attempting to recruit 5,000 graduate teachers as part of the government's "contingency plan" to counter strike action. "If the Fijian Teachers Association plans to go on strike after the school holidays, the ministry will try and mobilise these graduate teachers to fill up the posts," he declared.

Bainimarama told Radio Legend on August 4 there would be no arbitration of the current strikes or back down by the government on its austerity measures. He claimed his interim government had a specific mandate from the president "to take Fiji forward" and criticised past governments for bowing to unions. Bainimarama boasted that his government "did not have to worry about voters because it does not have any and will not budge because of unionists who are misleading their members".

Bainimarama's comments demonstrate that his ousting of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase was aimed above all at imposing the burden of Fiji's deep economic crisis onto working people. Bainimarama's determination to stand by the budget measures is to convince foreign investors and major regional powers, such as Australia and New Zealand, that his regime is the best vehicle for ramming through economic restructuring.

For all his strong-man posturing, however, Bainimarama's threats reveal a distinct nervousness that the movement of public sector workers might attract the support of other layers of the population who are hostile to the coup and the steady decline in living standards. Politically, the coup leader is depending not so much on the army's thuggish methods as on the Labour Party, which holds key posts in the military administration.

As finance minister, Labour Party leader Chaudhry was responsible for drawing up the revised budget in March to meet the demands of business and international capital by slashing spending by \$F200 million (\$US120 million). Former Labour deputy leader Poseci Bune is the public service minister, charged with imposing the pay and job cuts.

In a recent interview, Chaudhry declared that one of the "foremost" conditions to attract investors was "political stability" to "provide a predictable and stable platform on which investors can plan their business". The other prerequisite, Chaudhry said, was "adherence to the rule of law... I'm sure you will all agree that a state of lawlessness is not an ideal environment to do business in. The rule of law must be respected and observed."

Chaudhry's comments amount to a blank cheque to the military to repress striking workers if the trade union leaders fail to sabotage the strike by imposing a sell-out deal. At the same time, the Labour leaders have been working overtime with the unions to ensure that the strike does not take on the character of a broader political movement against the junta.

Labour's current wretched role is the culmination of two decades of cringing before, and collaboration with, the military and its various regimes. At each stage, Labour leaders, with the support of the unions, have thrust themselves forward not as the defenders of working people, but as the best means for implementing market reform in the interests of international finance capital and the local ruling elite.

In 1987, the military headed by General Sitiveni Rabuka ousted the Labour government of Prime Minister Timoci Bavadra, in which Chaudhry was finance minister. Bavadra and Chaudhry were among the Labour and union leaders detained by the army. Instead of challenging the coup leaders, Labour and the unions helped suppress strikes and

protests, and collaborated with the regime in imposing a new communal constitution aimed at entrenching the power of the ethnic Fijian elite at the expense of the island's substantial Indian population—the descendents of indentured Indian labourers brought to work on sugar farms early last century under British colonial rule.

Again in 2000, the Labour Party did not challenge the outcome of a second coup, nominally led by businessman and ethnic Fijian chauvinist George Speight, but backed by significant sections of the Fijian elite on the basis of further entrenching their privileges. Speight's vitriol was particularly directed against Chaudhry, the first ethnic Indian prime minister, who along with the rest of the cabinet was held at gunpoint for weeks in parliament house until Bainimarama stepped in to assume power and broker an end to the standoff.

As part of the deal, Chaudhry, the elected prime minister, was replaced by Qarase, a banker, who was known for his sympathy for Speight's demands. Bainimarama's removal of Qarase last year was above all driven by the failure of his government to arrest the continued economic decline, in part because of its communal measures aimed at bolstering a section of the Fijian chiefly elite. Chaudhry had no qualms in joining the cabinet of the military commander who ensured his removal from power in 2000 and implementing a program of austerity measures that has hit workers and the urban and rural poor.

Now Chaudhry and Bune are involved in intense collaboration with union leaders to shut down the strike. Yesterday, two of the three FICTU unions, the Public Employees Union and the Viti National Union of Taukei Workers, announced a return to work without any settlement.

This move places intense pressure on the teachers union to formally end its "suspended strike" and on nurses to return to work. It also opens the door for military repression against the FNA. Yesterday, 20 nurses were arrested during a protest outside the Cabinet Office while Public Service Minister Bune denounced their union for being "very irresponsible" and negotiating in bad faith.



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