

Solomon Islands: RAMSI forces mobilised against Solomons workers

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Soldiers and police in the Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) took to the streets of the capital, Honiara, last week in response to a strike by telecommunications workers and the threat of industrial action by public service employees. RAMSI's provocative intervention comes amid heightened social tensions driven by rising food and fuel inflation, and coincides with an ongoing dispute over the status of the occupying forces' immunity from Solomons' law.

"We want to ensure our presence is felt throughout Honiara City," a spokesman from the Solomon Islands' Police Media Unit told the *Solomon Star* on June 26. The spokesman described the operation as a precautionary measure to counter any possible disturbances caused by the telecommunications strike. The *Star* reported that RAMSI soldiers were also patrolling the streets while a military helicopter flew above. About 140 Australian soldiers and 450 mostly Australian RAMSI police are stationed in the Solomons.

That the latest mobilisation was triggered by an entirely peaceful industrial dispute reflects the true character of the RAMSI intervention force. Initially dispatched in July 2003, the Australian-led operation accompanied the takeover of much of the Solomons' state apparatus, including the police, legal system, prison service, finance department, and other arms of the public service. While the Australian-led intervention into the allegedly "failing" state was justified on humanitarian grounds, the police-military response to the recent labour disputes again demonstrates the reality: RAMSI's central purpose is to advance the interests of Australian imperialism and to counter any acts by the local population that might threaten those interests.

More than 300 employees of the majority state-owned telecommunications carrier, Our Telekom, went on strike on June 17. The workers demanded that the company's chief executive officer, Martyn Robinson, be sacked for allegedly discriminatory practices. Other demands presented by the workers related to retirement packages, leave pay, housing, and work conditions. Also of concern was the threatened privatisation of Telekom and takeover by the Irish telecommunications company, Digicel. "It is related to the planned sale of Telekom to Digicel, which these people

including Robinson, are heavily involved in, but we don't want to talk about their dirty deals," an unnamed workers' spokesman told the *Solomon Star*.

The strike caused significant disruptions to the Solomons' phone network. Most lines from Honiara to the provinces went down, many mobile phone and internet services were interrupted, and automatic teller machine facilities were also affected.

Workers ended their strike last Friday, June 27, after Robinson announced his resignation. This followed the intervention of Solomon Islands' Finance Minister Snyder Rini, who directed the Our Telekom board to terminate Robinson's contract. According to a *Solomon Star* report, however, the telecommunication workers met last Monday and denounced the decision to allow Robinson to remain CEO for another three months. They voted to resume strike action unless the executive was immediately removed. Once they returned to work, the Australian police and military mobilisation ended.

Shortly before this, the Public Employees Union called off a strike action and public protest that had been planned for June 27. The union's general secretary, Paul Belande, met with the minister for public services, Milner Tozaka, and reportedly negotiated a memorandum of understanding that dealt with some of the public service workers' demands. The terms of the deal were not announced, but the union had earlier demanded a 49 percent wage rise to help cope with inflation.

Rising world petrol and food prices have further impoverished many Solomon Islanders. Standard bus fares in Honiara more than doubled last month, while student fares tripled. The price of rice, a staple for many families, has also rapidly escalated. A 20-kilogram bag of rice cost about SI\$115 (A\$17) in Honiara in early April, but now sells for a reported SI\$195. The country's minimum wage is just SI\$3.20 an hour for forestry and fishery workers, and SI\$4 for others (A\$0.48 and A\$0.60).

"We have to face all these [rising] prices at once and it is just too much," Joy Buru, a mother of two, told the *Solomon Times*. "Even noodles in shops has gone up from \$1.60 to \$2.30 ... this is getting very difficult. The higher prices have caused life to be very bitter each day."

Deepening social tensions are exacerbating the crisis

confronting the RAMSI occupying forces. The Australian-led force has made no attempt to alleviate poverty and unemployment in the Solomons, and five years after the supposedly humanitarian intervention, many people find themselves significantly worse off. This state of affairs is feeding into the steadily mounting opposition to RAMSI's ongoing presence.

Former parliamentarian Alfred Sasako last month warned that "public disorder" may erupt unless the government was able to control prices. Opposition leader Manasseh Sogavare last week declared that he would move a motion of no confidence in Prime Minister Derek Sikua's government in the next sitting of parliament, due this month, on the grounds that nothing had been done to control inflation. It remains to be seen whether Sogavare has the numbers to unseat Sikua; one opposition MP claimed that several ministers were prepared to defect.

Sogavare's return to power is the last thing the Australian government wants. The former Howard government, with the complete support of the Labor Party, mounted a vicious and protracted regime change campaign against the Sogavare government, which culminated in its ousting through a no confidence vote in December last year. The former prime minister had attempted to reduce RAMSI's control over the finance department and other sectors, and also launched an official investigation into the April 2006 riots, which destroyed much of Honiara. Canberra attempted to derail the Commission of Inquiry, mounting a witch-hunt against the leading legal figures involved in establishing it—Julian Moti and Marcus Einfeld.

Despite the sabotage attempts, the commission completed its work and submitted a final report to the Sikua government in late April. But ten weeks later, the report has still not been publicly released. The *World Socialist Web Site* has already raised the question as to whether the document is being suppressed on the orders of the Rudd government. An examination of the Commission of Inquiry's final submissions indicates that one of the final report's likely findings is that RAMSI's legal immunity from Solomons' laws be rescinded.

Immunity was included in the 2003 Facilitation Act, which Canberra insisted be enacted by the Solomons' parliament when RAMSI was first deployed. The measure is still regarded as a critical aspect of the ongoing intervention, allowing RAMSI personnel to intervene into any development in the Solomons without fear of the legal consequences. The removal of immunity would throw into question RAMSI's viability, potentially inflicting a major blow to the Australian ruling elite's entire strategy in the South Pacific.

The Facilitation Act includes a provision for the Solomons' parliament to conduct an annual review of the terms of the legislation. Prior to its ousting, the Sogavare government had intended to oversee, for the first time, a parliamentary debate into various aspects of the Act, including immunity. The annual review is due to go through within the next fortnight, but it is

unclear whether Sikua, or any member of the government, will move to hold a genuine debate, or whether the Facilitation Act will be left unamended and simply rubber-stamped for another year. There can be little doubt that Australian officials are engaged in furious behind the scenes efforts to prevent a debate.

Immunity has already emerged as a central political issue, particularly following the June 13 death of a 26-year-old trainee nurse in a car accident caused by an allegedly drunk RAMSI police officer. The driver, a Samoan national, cannot be prosecuted in the Solomons unless the Samoan government waives immunity. Further inflaming tensions, a RAMSI police officer who was a passenger in the vehicle and badly injured in the crash has refused to provide a statement to Solomons' police.

A number of angry responses from ordinary Solomon Islanders have been published in the local media and posted on internet discussion forums.

The *Solomon Times* published a letter from Adrian Alamu: "This is really disappointing, considering the time, resources and effort our detectives wasted on this greedy, arrogant and irresponsible police officer. It shows its true colour and he may think that he has no obligation or [is] protected under this FA [Facilitation Act], but at least he should say something."

Another Solomon Islander wrote on an internet forum: "This Samoan idiot who was involved in the fatal accident few wks ago refuse to cooperate with our local police detectives. Is there any way our laws could bring him to cooperate under the RAMSI immunity? This is humiliating not only for the relatives of the deceased female but for all other Solomon Islanders... I guess this uncooperating Samoan officer knows well that he is under no obligation to respond to our local detectives because he is protected under the RAMSI immunity. I am still of the view that whatever circumstances surrounding the fatal incident is highly connected to the immunity enjoyed by RAMSI... Time to review the immunity or kick some responsible butts out. Stop pretending that Solomons is still a war zone."



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