

Australia: Pacific Islanders suffer slave-like conditions in fruit industry

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Australia's Liberal-National Coalition government has brushed aside recent exposures of the highly exploitative conditions facing Pacific Islander "seasonal workers" involved in fruit and vegetable harvesting and threatened to deport those who refuse to accept the harsh conditions.

Late last month ABC television's "7.30 Report" revealed that a group of Fijian and Tongan workers hired under the government's Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) were being paid as little as \$A10 per week to harvest tomatoes.

The Pacific Island workers were hired by AFS Contracting, a "government-approved" SWP employer in Victoria's Shepparton region, but sought permission to find other work. Those hired under the SWP scheme, however, can only work in Australia for a maximum of seven months per year and are tied to the farms contracted by their "Approved Employer."

Isikeli Fifita from Tonga told the program that he earned \$A201.96 for a week harvesting nearly three bins of tomatoes at the rate of \$68 per bin. A bin typically holds 500 kilograms of fruit. AFS Contracting deducted \$80 from his pay for accommodation, \$50 for health insurance, \$32 for transport and \$30 tax, leaving him with only \$9.96 in his pay packet.

Sia Davis said \$120 was deducted from her pay each week for the privilege of sharing a caravan with two other women. Two of the women had to share a bed. For two consecutive weeks, her pay was reduced to zero, after deductions imposed by the labour contractor.

The workers secretly recorded AFS Contracting owner Tony Yamankol who threatened to sack the workers in response to their complaints. "If I terminate you, [then] you won't come back to Australia [with] any other employer on this program," he said.

While the workers quit AFS and sought permission to

find another employer, their appeals have been ignored by the government. Minister for Employment Michaelia Cash has refused repeated requests by the ABC and other media outlets to be interviewed about the case. The Labor Party, which initiated the scheme when it was in government in 2008, and the unions, fully endorse the SWP scheme.

Australian immigration and employment officials who met with the workers in recent weeks said that they would be deported if did not return to AFS Contracting.

Merewairita Sovasiga told the ABC that government officials were "pushing us to go back home. Every one of us is not happy. And we are going back with nothing." Another worker, Manueli Taione, said, "If you don't want to go back to Fiji, they [the government] are trying to send us to our employer Tony [Yamankol] ... But I don't like the way they treat us, they treat us like slaves."

The "7.30 Report" is just the latest in a series of exposures of the exploitation in the agriculture and food-processing sectors under Australia's SWP scheme.

In late December, the *Weekly Times* newspaper reported on the deportation of six Fijian workers by PlantGrowPick, a Queensland based labour hire company. The workers said they were only paid \$1.20 an hour when the horticultural award rate is \$21.61 an hour, had been verbally abused by supervisors, denied medical access, refused work breaks and prohibited from attending church. After complaining about their treatment they were sent back to Fiji by the labour contractor.

This month Maroochy Sunshine, another Queensland labour-hire company, was found guilty of violating labour laws by the Fair Work Ombudsman. More than

half of the 22 Vanuatu workers hired to pick fruit and vegetables in the Lockyer Valley, the Sunshine Coast and Bundaberg were not paid any wages at all.

The Seasonal Workers Program was introduced by the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2008, following a similar Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme in New Zealand in 2007. In 2011, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard touted the benefits of the scheme to Pacific Island leaders falsely claiming that their countries and the workers' families and communities would benefit.

The SWP is a contemporary version of the system of "blackbirding" whereby nearly one million workers were used as cheap indentured labour in Australia and other Pacific countries from the 1860s to the 1940s. Many Pacific Islanders were kidnapped and sold to Australian landowners who treated them as virtual slaves with no security or citizenship rights (see: "Australian government prepares to revive 'blackbirding'").

The Fijian workers highlighted on the "7.30 Report" were told before signing up to the season workers program that they could earn \$657 per week on hourly award rates, excluding taxes and expenses, or an average of \$595 if they worked piece rates. The reality was nothing like this. According to recent Australian government statistics, the average residual income for workers in the SWP pilot program (after tax, travel, accommodation and living costs deductions) was only \$4,500 for a 16-week contract and \$7,500 for a 26-week contract.

Since its introduction, over 8,500 workers have been granted SWP visas and there are 70 "government-approved" employers. The program targets workers from the impoverished island states of the South Pacific—Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, Nauru, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Fiji and East Timor—who are being forced by worsening economic circumstances to seek work in Australia or New Zealand.

The average annual after tax-wage in Tonga is around \$A6,000 and in Fiji \$A8,000. Tonga, which has a population of just over 100,000, relies on remittances from the estimated 200,000 expatriates for 39 percent of its GDP.

The National Farmers Federation (NFF) has responded to the recent reports on the real wages and

conditions facing those hired under the SWP by stating that "bad publicity" could reduce the number of Pacific Islanders joining the program.

The NFF's concerns have nothing to do with ending the harsh and repressive conditions facing Pacific Islanders workers but maintaining the flow of cheap labour to the industry and maximising profits.

Early last month, the Liberal-National coalition announced that it was extending the SWP to other sectors of Australia's agricultural industry to include cattle, sheep, grains and mixed farming enterprises. This, the government cynically declared, was "good news for citizens from our SWP partner countries ... who will now have more opportunities to benefit from a wider variety of work experiences while also earning a decent wage."

The slave-like conditions created by the SWP scheme is not an aberration but the labour-hire business model that the ruling elite seeks to impose not just in the agricultural industry but on all sections of the working class.

The author also recommends:

New Zealand government to introduce cheap labour scheme for Pacific Island workers
[20 February 2007]



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