

Fiji airport workers return after month-long lockout

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About 200 service and maintenance workers returned to their jobs at Fiji's main airport in Nadi on Monday after a judge ordered an end to their month-long lockout. The workers had been suspended without pay since December 16, when they attended a meeting called by the Federated Airlines Staff Association (FASA) to discuss a range of grievances, including an 11-year pay freeze and allegations of sexual harassment.

The employer, Air Terminal Services (ATS), declared the meeting an "illegal strike" and would only allow the workers, a third of the workforce, to return if they signed a letter admitting guilt. Airport operations were maintained with 150 scab workers employed on three-month contracts. Up to 300 workers picketed the company headquarters throughout the Christmas period calling for an end to the lockout.

The court said on Saturday that ATS did not follow due process, giving the company 48 hours to allow the workers to return to their jobs. The judge also ordered that all pay and entitlements owed be restored. The highly unusual order no doubt reflects fears in ruling circles, including in the trade unions, that the dispute was threatening to provoke a broader rebellion among working people, over low wages and dire social conditions.

Thousands of Fijians turned out on January 13 to demonstrate their support for the locked-out workers. Local media reported that about 3,000 people marched through Nadi, but Radio New Zealand added that another 5,000 joined the rally at the end of the march. RNZ Pacific correspondent Sally Round said it was the biggest demonstration she had seen in Fiji, with crowds of workers in uniform, families with children, elderly people and human rights groups carrying banners, singing and chanting.

Addressing the rally, Felix Anthony, national secretary of Fiji's Trades Union Congress (TUC), issued a demagogic threat that the TUC would "shut this country down if we have to," and foreshadowed another march in the capital, Suva, on February 24. The unions were, however, more than ready to enter the Employment Relations Tribunal following a move initiated by the ATS, to negotiate a return to work.

The court's findings are highly conditional. Magistrate Andrew See warned that the actions of both parties had not been "completely exemplary." He said the workers' actions in walking off the job suggested that prima facie unlawful industrial action had been taken, but management made the situation worse by suspending workers without pay and without following established procedures.

In response, ATS issued a statement declaring "the decision does not prevent any disciplinary measures from being taken against the workers for abandoning their positions and engaging in an unlawful walkout." The management is considering "additional legal steps." It also said it would be making other changes to security "to prevent any further economic sabotage from taking place."

The unions will be deeply complicit in any measures taken against the workforce. Following the court's ruling, FASA national secretary Vilikesa Naulumatua immediately declared that no decision could now be made by management "without the workers' participation."

ATS was established in 1980 with a 51 percent shareholding by the government, and 49 percent held by the workforce in the Air Terminal Services Employee Trust (ATSET), which workers can join on payment of \$F2,500 (\$US1,250).

FASA facilitated the charade of workers'

involvement in the company. The ATS Board of Directors consists of seven members: four government representatives and three so-called “workers’ directors” elected via ATSET. The company boasts extensive “worker participation,” with “worker representatives” elected onto nine separate management committees.

Given the complete integration of the union with the company’s ownership and management structure, it is simply not credible that it represents the interests of the workers, any more than unions elsewhere in the world. FASA is directly responsible for the oppressive conditions facing the airport workers.

TUC chief Anthony earlier told the *Fiji Times* the December 16 meeting was not a work stoppage or strike but a “shareholders’ meeting,” called because the union was frustrated with the way the company was being run and costing them money. Anthony claimed the workers don’t have a say at board level despite owning 49 percent of shares.

Whatever FASA’s reasons for initiating the stoppage, the response of the workers and their supporters is another indication of the growing determination of the working class internationally to defend their jobs, wages and conditions as the New Year begins.

Workers were willing to defy the authoritarian and repressive Fijian government. Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama denounced the workers, saying the law was clear on industrial disputes and workers did not “follow the process”, which requires a secret ballot, when they walked off the job. Ominously the Chief of Staff of Fiji’s Military Forces, Colonel Ratu Jone Kalouniwai, demanded the workers return to work.

The Fijian regime has its roots in the 2006 coup led by the former military strongman Bainimarama. The election in September 2014, closely monitored by the military and carried out with anti-democratic intimidation of political opponents, was won by Bainimarama’s Fiji First Party. The military dominate the government and state apparatus.

Conditions of strict press censorship, military provocations and severe restrictions on opposition political parties remain in place. Entrenched anti-democratic measures, including suppression of the media, are directed against the working class and rural poor, and aimed at intimidating and silencing any opposition.

The gulf between rich and poor is widening. Since the first military coup in 1987, poverty and inequality have continued to increase. In 2016, 45 percent of Fiji’s 900,000 population was estimated to be living below the national poverty line. According to recent economic surveys, over 50 percent live on less than \$F25 a week and cannot meet their basic needs. In July last year, the government raised the minimum wage by 36 cents an hour to \$2.68. According to the TUC, it would need to be \$4 an hour to reach the poverty line.

More than 140,000 people live in more than 200 shanty towns, many of which exist on the outskirts of Fiji’s luxurious tourist resorts. Approximately 40 percent of Fijian children experience malnourishment. A study published in 2015 revealed that diabetes-related limb amputations were being conducted by the public health system at the rate of more than 700 a year.



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