

Pacific Dialogue Youth Forum

6 May, 2015

The state of the trade unions in Fiji and the challenges of overcoming restrictions

Summary of presentation by Mr Felix Anthony, National Secretary of the Fiji Trade Union Congress

Held at the Saint Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Suva, 30 people attended the presentation. Notable attendees included members from the EU, Australian and British High Commissions in Fiji, members of the Fiji Parliament, and youth groups from the University of Fiji.

The National Secretary of the Fiji Trade Union Congress, Mr. Felix Anthony, talked about the current state of the trade unions in Fiji. His speech centred on the trade unions and their struggle with the government to respect their workers' rights. Mr. Anthony noted that the current decrees still in place are having a negative impact in the union's activities as they are being restricted from doing anything, by limiting their right to assembly and common bargain.

He emphasised the decrees restricting freedom of assembly and the wider definition on terrorism, which makes it easier to charge anyone who might be considered a threat to the alteration of the national economy and public order. According to Mr. Anthony the decrees have abolished workers' rights and made it easier for employers to fire them. Additionally, any disputes between the two parties can take up to three years to settle and, if this dispute or claim exceeds \$5 million, then it is up to the Prime Minister of Fiji to decide the outcome. And finally, he emphasised that the current decrees on the media coverage restrictions have made matters worse as trade unions cannot advocate or express their views to the nation freely.

During the question and answer period, Mr Anthony mentioned that the International Labour Organization (ILO) has been a vital supporter of the unions in Fiji, even though; the Government is trying hard to undermine its work. They have made all possible obstacles, including delays and excuses, to ignore the organisation's recommendations. He said that even though other international organisations have "put pressure" on the government of Fiji, this sometimes was more a lip service than a real meaning, this is because governments do not want to be mean to each another. Hence the ILO, which is not a government organisation, has been effective with its pressure.

Questions from the floor included complaints that the new minimum wages bar is not enough to meet the current high costs of living in Fiji. This issue has been on the agenda of previous governments since 2000, and, at that time, they (the previous government) were talking about \$130 a week. Now the current weekly wage is \$85, which is going backwards. Another guest was interested to know whether an independent committee has been appointed to check out the check post of workers which were abolished by the decree. Mr Anthony said that the government has been trying to delay this process as much as they can.