

Sunday, 29 July 2011

Return to democracy in Fiji must include workers' rights and freedom of speech, say Australian unions

The Fiji military regime must reinstate human and workers' rights in its constitutional review process if it is serious about transitioning to a democracy, say unions.

Ahead of a meeting between the governments of Australia, New Zealand and Fiji tomorrow, ACTU President Ged Kearney has written to Foreign Minister Bob Carr to express Australian unions' concerns about the constitutional review process now underway.

"Respect for workers' rights, including collective bargaining and freedom of association to join a union, are fundamental for true democracy," Ms Kearney said. "The Fijian military regime has systematically violated workers' rights through a series of unilateral decrees and intimidation and harassment of union leaders.

"Basic rights and protections have been ripped away, collective bargaining has been undermined by individual contracts, and free and independent trade unions have been all but outlawed in key sectors of the economy.

"It is estimated that at least 40% of Fijians are living below the poverty line. Workers need strong representation from unions and labour rights if living standards are to be improved and the number of working poor is to be reduced.

"Fiji cannot be considered to have made a return to democracy until these workplace rights and respect for the conventions of the International Labour Organisation are restored.

"Until there is proof of progress on these issues, Australian unions call on our government to use extreme caution in endorsing actions that the regime argues demonstrates its commitment to a return to democracy in Fiji, including lifting any sanctions."

In the letter to Mr Carr, Ms Kearney said serious concerns remained over the level of public participation, inclusiveness of representation and transparency of the constitutional review process and whether elections slated for 2014 will be free and fair.

She said that given Australia has offered \$2.65 million of electoral funding to Fiji, it was incumbent on the Government to encourage greater transparency in the review process.

"While it appears that the military regime in Fiji is taking positive steps including establishing a new decree revoking an amendment to the Public Order Act which required a permit to hold a meeting, we are yet to see this implemented," Ms Kearney said.

"At the same time, other restrictions remain in place, including limits on the ability of Fijians to freely articulate their views. If the transparency and participation concerns remain unaddressed, there will be little ownership of the process by the Fijian people."

Ms Kearney said Australian unions supported the Fiji Trade Union Congress, which is seeking the return of rule of law and democracy underpinned by a Constitution that upholds human rights based on ILO and UN conventions.

Media contact:

Rebecca Tucker ph (03) 9664 7359 or 0408 031 269; mphillips@actu.org.au