

Thursday, 19 May 2011

Australian unions condemn latest attack on Fijian workers' rights by military dictatorship

Australian unions are gravely concerned about reports of a fresh round of attacks on the rights of workers in Fiji, including new restrictions on freedom of association and collective bargaining.

The ACTU has today written to Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd to express alarm that a new decree from Fiji's illegal and unelected military regime effectively outlaws unions and neuters any effective representation of Fijian workers.

"We have deep concerns about this decree which also takes away rights and protections negotiated through collective bargaining," said ACTU President Ged Kearney.

She said Australian unions were still attempting to verify the reports, and if they were correct, would be registering their protest in the strongest possible terms.

"At a time when workers and unions are leading democratic uprisings against totalitarian governments in North Africa, it is disturbing to see further repression of human rights in our own Pacific neighbourhood," Ms Kearney said.

"It's obvious there is no democracy in today's Fiji. A series of decisions introduced by the military regime of Frank Bainimarama have curtailed human rights and suppressed dissenting views.

"The regime has adopted intimidation tactics to instill fear in workers and trade unions, and the ability of workers to represent workers has been severely restricted. Earlier this year, the head of the Fiji trade unions was detained by the military twice.

"Yet with 40% of Fijians living below the poverty line on less than \$1.25 a day – and 60% of them in work – the role of trade unions has never been more important. Australian unions will stand shoulder to shoulder with Fijian workers, their families and trade unions in the struggle for human rights and democracy.

"Australian unions stand ready to assist their Fijian brothers and sisters in any way they can."

The new attack on workers' rights is reportedly contained in the draft *Critical Industries Employment Decree 2011*. It lists a number of companies and industries, including sugar and airlines, as critical.

Reports say the decree gives absolute powers to the regime, with the rights and terms of condition of employment of workers rendered meaningless.

Under the pretext of "continued viability and sustainability of critical national industries" and "avoidance of interruption", the decree forcibly outlaws independent trade unions from representing workers in these industries.

It also removes the rights of Fijians to vote freely for their own union representatives and allows the government and corporations to tear up existing collective agreements, and to instead unilaterally set wages and conditions without negotiation.

Ms Kearney said Australian unions were investigating the reports and if verified would urge the Australian Government to consider further diplomatic and trade measures to encourage Fiji to restore democracy and human rights forthwith.

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