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Renewed trade agreement with Fiji risks legitimising an oppressive regime: unions

The Australian Government's decision to renew a textile, clothing and footwear scheme with the Fijian Government under a multi-lateral trade agreement will do nothing to improve the lives of lowly paid Fijian textile workers, say unions.

The agreement which gives unfettered access to Australia's markets – the largest market for Fijian textile products – will merely legitimise an oppressive regime that has persistently flouted human rights in the face of international and local opposition, said ACTU President Ged Kearney.

By extending the South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Co-operation Agreement (SPARTECA), the Australian Government is putting the theoretical benefits of free trade above the everyday intimidation, harassment and oppression of real people in Fiji, she said.

The trade agreement means better profits for textile businesses in Fiji who operate in an environment where draconian laws in Fiji are being strategically implemented across the economy, denying workers' rights, keeping wages unfairly low and flouting basic democratic freedoms.

The textile industry in Fiji has a poor history of anti-worker lobbying, opposing minimum wage increases and applying for exemptions for having to pay any wage rises its workers were entitled to.

The industry also has a poor track record on labour and safety standards and claims by the industry of playing an important role in alleviating poverty are masking serious cases of exploitation of Fijian workers.

"The agreement signed in the so-called interests of textile industry in Fiji merely subjects its workers to further entrenchment of human rights violations as such an agreement legitimises and protects the Bainimarama regime," Ms Kearney said.

"It makes an absolute mockery of the Australian Government's so called stance against the illegal government's rule.

"This decision is in stark contrast to the stand the Australian Government has taken on excluding Fiji from regional negotiations on a new trade agreement until there is a return to democracy and human rights in Fiji."

The ACTU and the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia will be calling on all businesses, operating with or within Fiji, to demonstrate clearly to Australian consumers that they are not profiteering from the plight of textile workers in Fiji.

Michele O'Neil, National Secretary of the TCFUA said: "This decision does nothing to support workers either here in Australia or Fiji. Clearly the Federal Government has listened to business leaders to profiteer from an increasingly isolated and oppressive Government."

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