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Fijian military must be withdrawn from sugar mill immediately, say Australian unions

Australian unions condemn the latest escalation of aggression and intimidation by the Fijian military regime of sugar industry workers seeking to take legal industrial action.

There have been reports today that soldiers from the Fijian army have been sent to the Lautoka Sugar Mill, where workers recently voted to take industrial action in pursuit of a pay rise.

This is the latest development in a campaign of intimidation against the sugar workers, who are exercising their legally protected right to take industrial action, said ACTU President Ged Kearney.

“This is one step short of actual violence and we are fearful of what may happen next,” Ms Kearney said.

“We call on the Fijian government to immediately withdraw the military from the mill and allow the workers to exercise their rights.”

Fiji sugar workers have gone without a wage adjustment for seven straight years, and have been offered a mere 5.3% increase (approximately \$1.30 per day) when real wages during the period have declined by more than 40%.

The pattern of intimidation in recent days has included workers being threatened with termination if they went on strike, Fiji Sugar Corporation management offering retired workers five-year contracts to act as strike-busters, and management threatening to source workers from India to operate the mills during a strike.

Ms Kearney said since the military dictatorship led by Commodore Frank Bainimarama seized power of the Fiji in 2006, human and workers' rights have been under attack.

Over 60% of Fijian wage earners now live below the poverty line, many workers earn less than \$3 an hour, and those speaking out against the regime are threatened and assaulted.

A decision is due at the International Labour Organisation this October on whether to establish a high-level Commission of Inquiry into workers' rights in Fiji.

“The developments this week are just another demonstration of Fiji's disregard for fundamental labour rights and why governments, including the Australian Government, should be supporting the establishment of the Commission,” Ms Kearney said.

Australian unions are spearheading an international campaign for workers' and human rights in Fiji. Find out more at www.destinationfiji.org

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