

Press Release: “National Budget a Failure”

It comes as no surprise that the national budget has been passed in Parliament despite no major focus on saving jobs so people could afford to put food on the table during this pandemic.

The AG's comments that he made “*targeted decisions in the 2020-2021 budget to address the needs of the Fijian people while preparing the country for when borders will reopen*” is a hollow and naïve statement and shows blatant ignorance of the current plight of the Fijian people.

At a time when workers are trying to grasp onto their jobs no matter how much of their rights and benefits they have to give up, government is engrossed on decreasing departure tax or promoting buying of homes and reducing duties and taxes on goods that do not make a difference to an ordinary worker, nor are those goods accessible to those laid off. Reduction in alcohol price to boost an almost non-existent tourism industry when there are no tourists or when locals cannot afford being tourists is an unrealistic move.

Government's ignorance in protecting and promoting local industries so that local jobs can be protected and created during this crisis reeks of ill-advice or lack of knowledge of its local people and economy. Providing \$400 worth of subsidy for tourist is a slap on the local workers which should have been better used to assist workers to provide for their basic needs. Local industries particularly agriculture, fishing, and home-based small business initiatives is what is keeping the unemployed people from starving. This is where government investment's must be targeted at, to ensure that our economy moves from import based to self-sufficiency. The government needs a reality check and has to look inward rather than outward towards the skies for those tourists. Merely increasing the agriculture budget or providing seedlings is not what will yield the results that we should achieve.

All in all, it is a paper budget that makes no difference to the common man in the society. Parents are still struggling to provide food and meet their utility costs and

transport costs as well as negotiate for rent. Children are turning up at school for lunches to be provided by the school or other generous institutions. How can this budget be claimed to address the needs of the Fijian people when our children go to school without able to afford a lunch. How is it that our parliamentarians cannot see this inadequacy and still pass a budget that did not address lunch affordability for school children or the ability of a family to provide such basic needs. Government has continued to send people home without any means of support or respect for their right to earn a decent living. To make matters worse, the AG plans to send municipal workers home at the age of 55 with no negotiations or respect to collective agreements signed. This is a clear violation of Section 75 Prohibited Grounds of Discrimination of the Employment Relations Act.

We had proposed basic food items to be declared VAT free but that did not eventuate for reason know only to the learned Minister of Economy. The governments continued to plunder the funds of the FNPF as an ATM and it has no plan on how to keep itself upright during a crisis of any kind. Be it a cyclone or this pandemic, FNPF has been the saviour for this ill-prepared government. Our submission to create a Workers Fund that could assist those in need during such times fell on deaf ears and the FNPF continues to be abused for months now.

Everyday a business sends more of its workers home or reduces their working hours. This means less pay. The situation is worsening day by day and the real impact of this I felt not now but, in the months, to come. As a country we have done nothing new to reverse the problems we already had or are facing now, but multiplied it three-fold as we have laid off more than 100, 000 workers.

This budget has completely failed the country and its citizens, again.

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