



FIJI TRADES UNION CONGRESS

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PRESS RELEASE: THE SILENCE OF THE GOVERNMENT IS DEAFENING

The loss of jobs at Fiji Airways and many other major employers is causing great hardship to thousands of families around the country. Many have ongoing financial commitments for housing, rents, motor vehicles, hire purchase, utility bills and everyday food bills. These are the realities that workers and their families have to face. The FTUC understands the current pandemic crisis affects all businesses. However, there does not appear to be a similar understanding for workers' plight. Government has moved to assist businesses with a reduction in FPNP contributions and other tax incentives, and now the reduction of Paternity and Family Care leave, and finally decided to blame God for the pandemic. This is outrageous.

This pandemic is manmade, and China is not located in heaven. The lockdowns were imposed by Governments, not God. We note that Governments while doing all for employers has done absolutely nothing for workers. We note that no obligation is placed on employers for all the concessions that are being given to them. It is no justification to terminate workers just because other airlines or employers have done so. The difference is that workers who are terminated abroad are assisted by their Governments and have social safety nets like unemployment benefits or special stimulus packages for workers who have lost their jobs. We see nothing of that sort here in Fiji. So, let's compare apples with apples.

Fiji Airways terminations send a very wrong signal to other employers who think now they can terminate workers overnight without any further obligation. Government's sanctioning of such behavior is worrying to say the least. No one disputes the challenges that Fiji Airways faces. What is abhorrent is the manner in which they have terminated workers. There was absolutely no dignity accorded to workers and least of all total lack of good faith despite telling the world that Fiji Airways employees were one happy family. The family has been tossed out the window. Simply shameful behavior. It is becoming clear that Fiji Airways wishes to do away with the union and start afresh with individual contracts, reduced wages and salaries, and benefits.

Many Employers likewise have done extremely well over the past decade posting huge profits and expanding their businesses but found themselves on their knees when the lockdown occurred. Surprisingly, they wish to make us believe that their balance sheet was not as strong as they appeared to be. This crisis has really shown that many (not all) businesses have absolutely no loyalty or commitment to their employees. A clear message to all workers in Fiji.

They have demonstrated that there is no such thing as corporate social responsibility in their policies. There is only one policy and that is profits above everything and that appears to be alright with Government. These terminations have taken place despite the Prime Minister and Minister for Labour urging employers not to terminate workers. The silence of the Government is deafening when workers are being terminated in hundreds at a time.

The latest announcement by the Attorney General that workers can go again to FNPF to withdraw their retirement fund is no help. This Government has repeatedly relied on FNPF whenever disaster strikes. All this does is to ensure that workers when they retire will not have a secure future as FNPF is pledging. The FTUC opposes the use of FNPF for such purposes. Government has the responsibility to assist workers in such crisis and it is about time the Government get its act together because this crisis will not go away soon. Repeated withdrawals from FNPF will have FNPF and workers on their knees soon.

The FTUC is already getting reports that many families are going hungry or missing meals simply because they cannot afford meals. Many are just surviving on noodles and bread. It is not acceptable for the Prime Minister to simply say that terminations are unavoidable. It is time for the Prime Minister to tell the nation what Governments plan are to deal with this massive unemployment and severe poverty that exist in Fiji today and which is likely to get worse with just fancy speeches.

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