

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS AT THE 89th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING AND CONFERENCE OF FIJI TEACHERS UNION

BRO. MUNIAPPA GOUNDAR – NATIONAL PRESIDENT

The Chief Guest, Dr. Neelesh Gounder, – Senior Lecturer, School of Economics, University of the South Pacific, Your Excellency's and Members of the Diplomatic Corp, Permanent Secretary for Education Heritage and Arts, Secretary General of Council of Pacific Education, Invited Dignitaries, Representatives from the sister organizations, Union Colleagues, representatives from civil societies and NGOs, The Special Administrator / CEO Nasinu Town Council, Senior Citizens, Retired Teachers, FTU Stalwarts, FTU Executive Members, Branch Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.....

A very Good Morning and hearty Bula Vinaka to each and everyone.

It is indeed an honor for me to welcome you all this morning to the 89th Annual General Meeting and Conference of the Fiji Teachers' Union.

I am apparently pleased to see delegates and well wishers congregating in such large numbers. I thank you most sincerely for taking out your time and giving credence to the Annual General Meeting and Conference. The last time we met in Nasinu was in 2015 and things have changed significantly since then. These changes, ladies and Gentlemen, need not be articulated as this is common knowledge to all of us.

Delegates and the Union stalwarts, I must state here that your attendance is a show of strength and the courage to fight against

fear and oppression. Your attendance is a show of confidence in your union and an indication that collective bargaining and collective negotiations with all stakeholders of education is the best way out to bring about educational and economic prosperity. Your attendance and participation in the Union activities is a show of unity. You will all agree and in all honesty I say that this show of solidarity gives us, the leaders of the union, the strength and the drive to forge ahead in this challenging times, times which are made difficult by our own Education Ministry. I reiterate it is challenging because of the imposition of draconian contracts, demotion of teachers from confirmed positions, and reduction in school holidays with the implementation of student free days. Dear members the list is quite long and we will discuss this in detail in our meeting later today. But at this point in time, I must say that these impositions are restricting our basic civil rights as employees of the state.

Let me add here that the Fiji Teachers Union is becoming stronger and healthier in its fight to bring about balance and fairness in employment associated issues with the relevant government agencies. We have over 5000members. People will come and go, the Union will stay. Leaders will come and go but the Union will stay. It is therefore of utmost importance that we have our allegiance to Unions as Unions have the power and zest to bring accountability and transparency into the system.

“We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters or we are going to perish together as fools.” --*Martin Luther King, Jr.*

2019 CONFERENCE THEME.

Let me make a few calculated comments and observations on the Conference theme: “Educational Reforms – Implications on Fijian Education.”

There was a series of discussion amongst executive members to brainstorm the appropriate theme for this year’s conference. It was done partly to encourage debate amongst teachers and interested parties on the effectiveness of various policy decisions made in recent times. The school system since 2006 has been inundated with new announcements of policies almost on a regular basis. This has become more frequent and erratic since 2014 and as such has caused confusion not only amongst the teachers, but also amongst the decision makers themselves.

The teachers have had to face the brunt of all the changes announced without having any thought on the implications these changes will have on teaching. A generation of teachers was not adequately skilled to cope with some of the radical changes. The responsibility for reskilling all existing practicing teachers was partly on the teachers themselves but mostly on the Ministry of Education. This has not happened from the employer’s side. The younger generation have mostly benefitted from the changes which have given significant prominence to technology alone and has sidelined the much needed know how and experience in managing educational institutions.

It is for me, as your president brothers and sisters, to remind ourselves that a union is about solidarity. It is founded on the principles of collective decision-making and collective action. My message to the teachers is that during testing times, we have to remain united, irrespective of what proportion of the membership benefits- after all it is a win for unionism and fairness. I reiterate that Fiji Teachers Union is not against reforms, but we demand that

reforms be made and implemented in full consultation with teacher unions, as we represent and have the mandate of members to do so. This is also a requirement of the Sustainable \Development Goal's which the Government is signatory to.

The best way forward, late as it may be, is to appoint an Education Commission and let the Commission do the widest possible consultation on all matters of Education Reforms. I have said on many occasions that while extrapolating the issues of the status of teachers in Fiji after reforms, we hold the philosophy that a teacher is the treasure of any community's worth and wealth. Reforms are good if it is on mutual understanding and supported by all involved. Ladies and Gentlemen, I still stand by it today.

Educationists have argued that the reforms brought about by any institution after having had a transparent and honest consultation would enhance productivity. However absence of fair representation of stakeholders and ad hoc decision making will have a vast impact on teachers and that of the teaching profession. Rather than making it more attractive and appealing to potential teacher trainees, it will put the profession in crisis and as such the nation as a whole would suffer.

The unions stand ready to assist Ministry of Education in any such exercise. There are signs that the new Minister and the Assistant Minister, being former teachers, would appreciate the need for a participative framework to adopt new reforms. Sporadic, unplanned introduction of changes can be counterproductive. Most importantly, no changes should be made without first assessing whether the system is ready for implementation. The system consists of all the stakeholders of education. Towards the crucial end are the teachers. They will have to be involved and prepared to adopt the changes. Only then the child who is at the end of the process and for whom, probably, everything is done, will benefit.

Subsequently I would also request the Ministry of Education to call for the congregation of an Education Forum, where the union can come in with its valuable suggestions to assist. Having our motto as Child our Hope, I am referring to the changes in curriculum that is a point of discussion not only with the universities, but the employers of this country as well. I firmly believe that if wider consultation was done, we would have been having the best curriculum, but it is still not late to include us in such important initiative.

INDUSTRIAL MATTERS

I will focus on some pertinent issues, amongst many, that directly affect and challenge the teachers. We will discuss and debate on the rest of it in the AGM proper.

OPEN MERIT RECRUITMENT SYSTEM [OMRS]

The Union has been consistently and persistently submitting to the Education Ministry to consider proven performance on the job with relevant experience and qualification for Heads of Schools position. Sadly, the Ministry failed to take cognizance of this and as a result some of the top performing Heads of Schools missed out and are now faced with very humiliating and depressing predicaments.

The Union believes that it is not only these Heads of schools who have been hard done, but the children as well, for they are deprived of the experienced school leaders.

The Union further brings to the attention of the Ministry, that if the OMRS for Heads of the Schools is not reviewed at the earliest, the quality of education delivery will become a thing of the past.

ACTING APPOINTMENTS AND POLICIES

At the beginning of this year, the acting appointments as Heads of Schools sent shock waves to the teaching fraternity. Assistant teachers were appointed to act as school Principals. The rhetoric from the Ministry was that “these officers were appointed based on their Job Test rankings...”

How a classroom teacher can come and sit at the helm of the school while there is a sitting confirmed Vice Principal at the school? To FTU, this is devoid of any reasoning!!

It is important that officers who are appointed to act meet the MQR. Selective appointments would be demoralizing to the hard working and deserving officers.

I therefore, appeal to the ministry to take stock of what has happened and correct the anomaly at the earliest in the best interest of everyone – the teachers, the students and the parents.

EXECUTIVE TEACHER POSITIONS:

The 1993 Job Evaluation Exercise saw merit in recommending that 854 Executive Teacher positions be created in primary schools. Apart from full time teaching, the Executive Teachers were responsible for providing professional leadership through team meetings and staff development sessions. They were responsible for developing effective and practical remedial programmes. This assisted the more challenged students and there were fewer dropouts. And for all these the E.T’s were paid an allowance of

\$2000.00 per annum. However, in 2009, as a cost cutting measure, the MOE reduced the E.T. positions to 427 and then removed all except for the small schools. And now all are gone with the new JEE.

The union calls upon the MOE to restore the Executive Teacher positions for the delivery of quality education.

CONGESTION OF URBAN SCHOOLS:

Ladies and Gentlemen, those who teach in urban schools would agree that the class size had increased exponentially. While the union is appreciative of the fact that extra teachers have been deployed in some rural and remote small schools, the same cannot be said for the urban schools. I sympathize with those urban colleagues who have to teach large classes. This is made more difficult when some teachers are away from school and the already large classes are combined. Here the safety of students is compromised and learning is greatly affected. FTU therefore proposes that teacher aids are appointed for such urban schools so that this problem could be addressed.

PAPER WORK FOR THE SCHOOL HEADS AND THE TEACHERS

With the introduction of the Work Unit Results, the teachers as well as the Heads of Schools are taken back in terms of the amount of paperwork in schools. A few years back, realizing the amount of time teachers spent on paperwork, the then Minister abolished unnecessary paper work in schools. This was a big sigh of relief for all the teachers who had more time to prepare and teach the children under their care. However this is again bothering the teachers. It would be of a better sense if the assessors do school visitation and see for themselves what changes are being brought

about and decide on points rather than going over massive narrations,

I would like to echo some of the challenges we will be dealing with this year. The bread and butter issues will remain on the forefront. Some of these have been outstanding since 2006. We will need to continue to deal with them. All the issues affect our collective welfare. These issues include:

- ✓ Ensuring tenure for teachers – job security
- ✓ Correcting anomalies of JEE – Graduate Salary, AHT / HOD ED 5C / AP medium schools
- ✓ Reviewing the OMRS – emphasis on relevant qualification, relevant experience and proven performance
- ✓ Getting ECCE teachers on the same terms and conditions of work as primary teachers.
- ✓ Streamlining Teacher Transfer Guideline - revert to transfer on humanitarian grounds, mutually agreed swaps in case of district transfers etc.
- ✓ Reviewing the Disciplinary Guideline – the current practice of MEHA being the prosecutor, the judge and the jury to stop. MEHA to investigate and refer all cases to Public Service Disciplinary Tribunal. **“We must remember that a right lost to one is lost to all.”—William Smith, Jr.**
- ✓ Restoration of the Consultative Structures – Central Staff Board [Promotions], Joint Consultative Committee [review / forward planning] and Curriculum Advisory Services [teachers on the ground to be fully involved in curriculum development / curriculum review]
- ✓ Reviewing Annual Performance Appraisal [My APA] – should look at school year [Jan – Dec]

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Coming closer home, let me deliberate on services of the union:

1. IN- HOUSE MEDICAL SCHEME

A lot of members have benefited from the Medical Scheme since its inception in July 2011.

Many members were skeptical during the inception of the scheme but today it meets the needs of the members – whether for local or overseas treatment. We now have a healthy surplus. Benefits are increasing - where the patient is put on a “waiting list” in the public hospital and if the treatment is urgent and can be a danger to the health of the patient if not treated immediately, he or she is treated at a private hospital.

If the treatment is available at the public hospital and the patient is placed in a queue for more than a month and he or she prefers treatment at a private hospital then the scheme meets such cost as stipulated in the policy which is 8500.00 plus 50% of the cost. However, I am also requesting members to bear in mind the rising cases of NCDs in our country and do all they can to be medically fit and sound.

I can assure the members that the benefits will increase as we progress.

CONCLUSION

Invited Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues, I have deliberated on the concerns of the members, concerns of the teachers on the ground, the concerns of FTU regarding the delivery of quality education to our children, the challenges faced by our teachers and what the Union is going to do as a way forward.

Experience has shown that it would not be plain sailing – experience has also shown us that sometimes it takes long for the Ministry to see the constructive input of the Union to address the issues affecting the teachers and thus the teaching and learning. But I am glad to say that when they finally do, they invite the Union to hear us. For they know, people will come and go, the Union will remain.

I quote Micheal P “There may be a tomorrow or there may not, but there were and are those moments when we come together and put ourselves beyond the reach of self and acknowledge that we are all one. *End of quote.*

Honourable Chief Guest, Invited Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues, once again, most sincerely, I thank each one of you for your timely presence and your unwavering support. I welcome all the delegates, especially the maritime members, to the AGM and Conference. To the first timers, I say welcome to the FTU family.

Finally, I wish everyone a meaningful and enriching 89th AGM and Conference.

Long Live Fiji Teachers’ Union

