

2nd September, 2020

Press Release: Noisy Minister

The Minister for Labour's outburst in the parliament on Tuesday, 1st September was nothing but noise to cover up for his incompetence on the job. A strategy many use in the hope when real issues are not intended to be addressed. It is amusing that this minister Bala attempts to give a lecture on tripartism when he himself has absolutely no idea of the real concept of tripartism, let alone industrial relations. He has demonstrated complete ignorance of his role as 'Minister for Labour' and often resorts to humiliating anyone who questions including his own staff in the presence of others. He attempted to do just that in parliament once again.

The Fiji Trades Union Congress has for decades been committed to tripartism and has contributed enormously to the development of a strong Industrial relations platform in Fiji. We participated in the Tripartite Forums, Labour Advisory Boards and many tripartite bodies and committees over decades. This "Johnny come lately" will not lecture the Trade Unions on tripartism. The FTUC participated in the Employment Relations Advisory Board (ERAB) since 2008 until 2017 when it became clear that the government was not a sincere partner in ERAB. Despite signing two agreements and numerous undertakings to ILO, this government has yet to honor agreements signed in 2015 and 2016. The FTUC despite this participated in informal discussions with Employers and the Government to pursue the agreements without any progress because of the absence of any leadership from this very minister. This minister is unable to act without directions from the Attorney General which is a well-known fact. Yet he pretends to know it all.

Many attempts have been made to revive the 'Tripartite Structures' including the Committee of Experts of ILO who have urged government to ensure full compliance with Convention 144 on tripartism. No action has been taken by this minister or government. The Reports are clear that it is government who is violating the Convention and that it has to act in an appropriate manner. There is no point in apportioning blame on FTUC in parliament where FTUC is unable to respond.

Honorable Tabuya was correct when she stated that the most recent survey on the impact of COVID 19 on workers conducted by FTUC was completed successfully and a report was launched. The funding provided by ILO was a small fraction of what the government was allocated (\$75,000). We are told that the government survey was a disaster with government seeking more funds to complete a report. We now even doubt the outcome of that survey, if there will be one anytime soon.

The minister's claim that government's allocation of funds from ILO was given to FTUC is utterly false. We do not even believe the minister has any idea of what or how the survey was to be conducted yet he gives assurance to parliament that a report will be ready soon. We say that when and if the report arrives, it will be irrelevant as the situation on the ground continues to change and for the worse as more and more workers are losing their jobs and the situation for many is getting dire. The Report was to be made as soon as possible as a snapshot of the situation at the time the survey was conducted and not months later.

It is time that minister Bala takes his job seriously and makes a contribution to harmonious industrial relations in Fiji and not just warm his seat and take directions. Making unfounded allegations does not help. The FTUC is committed to genuine tripartism on the basis of equality and mutual respect. We are not prepared to simply showcase some semblance of tripartism for international consumption. We invite the minister to take advice and the assistance of ILO to understand "tripartism at work".

We at FTUC continue to be prepared to enter into discussions on reviving tripartism in Fiji. The latest attempt at doing this was on Friday, 14th August, 2020 when in the last minute the Employers, FTUC and ILO were advised that the "minister was in the west" despite earlier confirming the meeting. That's the kind of commitment we see from this minister. It's time for this minister to cut out the noise and get into action. That will speak louder.

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