

Wednesday, 6 June 2012

Outrage as international employer group prevents ILO from hearing about abuse of worker rights in Fiji

The action of the peak global employer group in preventing the International Labor Organisation's annual conference from discussing violations against Fijian and other workers is an outrage, say Australian unions.

ACTU President Ged Kearney said the conference in Geneva was this week set to hear from Fiji union leaders about the military regime's restrictions on worker and human rights. It was also to hear cases of 24 other countries where violations of workers' rights are considered to be extremely serious.

But Ms Kearney said the International Organisation of Employers had refused to allow discussion about any cases of abuse of labour rights, including those occurring in Fiji.

"This shocking and self-interested action from the international employer group is nothing short of irresponsible and the only purpose it serves is to prevent international scrutiny of the atrocities that are occurring against workers around the world," Ms Kearney said.

Fijian authorities were this week to appear before a tripartite committee at the conference to explain their serious and persistent failure to respect freedom of association as required by ILO Convention 87, their mistreatment of workers and trade unions and their failure to respond to ILO requests for change.

The committee presented an important and rare opportunity for the Fiji Trade Union Congress and other workers, governments and employers, to tell the international community what is happening in the island nation. It would also have been an opportunity for the international community to call on Fiji to immediately repeal the offensive decrees that restrict worker and union rights, and to fulfil their obligations under fundamental ILO conventions.

Fiji Trade Union Congress Secretary Felix Anthony said workers in viewed the ILO as a glimmer of hope.

"But this hope has been dashed by employers who failed to see the bigger picture and to understand the real role of the ILO," Mr Anthony said. "These employers are obsessed with their own interest rather than that of labour around the world who pin their hope and aspirations on the ILO to ensure dignity at work."

Ms Kearney said unionists from around the world had travelled to Geneva, some risking their lives in doing so, because it presented an opportunity to draw the attention of the international community to the abuses of workers' rights occurring in their countries. This is the first time since the Committee was formed in 1926 that cases of serious non-compliance with ILO conventions by member-states have not been heard.

Fijian workers' rights have increasingly been violated under Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama's unelected government, which over the last year has stepped up its attack through the introduction of new decrees that place even greater restrictions on human rights.

"Fijian workers not only deserve for their story to be told to the ILO, but the world has an obligation to stand up for them and to condemn the Fijian authorities for their actions," Ms Kearney said.

The action by employer groups comes as the annual survey of violations of trade union rights by the International Trade Union Confederation said the Fijian "military junta launched an aggressive campaign to dismantle the trade union movement" in 2011.

Media contact: Rebecca Tucker ph. (03) 9664 7359 or 0408 031 269