

Fiji authorities suppress May Day protests, arrest locked-out workers

By John Braddock
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The authoritarian regime of Fiji Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama last week banned two May Day protests and arrested over 30 workers and trade union officials, accusing them of breaches of “public order.”

The majority of those arrested were protesting workers who had earlier been locked out by the Fiji Water Authority (FWA). More than 2,000 FWA workers, most of whom were deemed to be “temporary,” had their contracts suddenly terminated and were told to reapply for their jobs. Some 800 workers filed grievance claims against the company for unlawful termination and for their collective agreement to be enforced.

Police quickly moved to arrest locked-out FWA workers who gathered outside the utility’s depots on April 30 and May 1. The Fiji Trades Union Congress (FTUC) said the police removed people from land owned by the National Union of Workers (NUW) and also stopped workers from congregating, even on their own land. *Fiji Village* reported the authority was working with police to “deal with” the workers.

Organised by the FTUC, the May Day events included a planned nationwide protest on May 3, followed by a march through Nadi on May 4. The FTUC had applied for permits to hold the protests over the national minimum wage, labour law reforms and the right to strike, but cancelled them after permits were denied.

The protests were also timed to coincide with the 52nd annual conference of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which was being hosted by a Pacific island country for the first time. Nearly 3,000 international delegates, including finance ministers, central bank governors and business representatives, met in Nadi over five days, supposedly to discuss issues such as poverty, inequality and climate change.

The government deployed more than 400 police for the duration of the conference. A police spokesman declared they would ensure the meetings would be held without “any major incidents.” Fijian Economy Minister Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum warned people not to use the ADB meeting to “undermine Fiji’s reputation.”

The Fijian Teachers Association (FTA) had earlier received a letter from the secretary of education instructing teachers not to join the protests. FTA president Netani Druavesi said teachers’ rights were protected under the constitution and the letter was “illegal and a threat to the country’s educators.” Eight FTA executive members were questioned by police about the proposed protests.

Police then conducted a number of arrests on May 1. Those detained included FTUC general secretary Felix Anthony, the secretaries of the FTA and nurses’ union and an officer of the NUW. Acting police chief Bitukula Waqanui told the *Fiji Times* the union officials were detained for “alleged breaches of the law.” The following day, police raided the FTUC headquarters.

After being jailed overnight, the union officials were released without charge. However, 28 FWA workers were detained and appeared in the Lautoka Magistrates Court on May 3, charged with unlawful assembly. A police spokesman told media “the group unlawfully gathered on a piece of land in Lautoka ... and refused to disperse when directed to by police.”

The workers were granted bail under tight restrictions, including a 6pm to 6am curfew, and are required to report to the police station every day. They were ordered to surrender their passports, and provide a cash bail bond of \$100 each. The workers are due to reappear in court on 24 May for a plea hearing.

The NUW has taken the FWA employment dispute to

a tribunal hearing. While the FTUC said it would “not rule out further protests,” the unions are not organizing any industrial action to defend the arrested workers or oppose the layoffs at the authority.

Immediately before the arrests, the FTUC had been in tripartite discussions with the government and business representatives to implement “labour reforms” to meet the requirements of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The government claims it has met all but one of the ILO’s rules, underlining that such measures have nothing to do with defending the rights of the working class.

An ILO spokesman told Radio NZ on May 8 that his organisation was instrumental in negotiating with the Fiji government, “in coordination with the rest of the UN system,” to have Anthony and other union officials released from gaol. The ILO has not however intervened on behalf of the FWA workers.

The sacking and persecution of the FWA workers and ban on the protests again underlines the dictatorial nature of the regime, which rests directly on the military.

The Fiji First Party (FFP) of former coup leader Bainimarama has been in power since 2014, following eight years of military rule. In the 2018 elections, the FFP retained office in a sham contest between two parties run by former military strongmen. The main opposition SODELPA party is led by Sitiveni Rabuka, the instigator of two military coups in 1987.

Worsening social inequality and misery—28 percent of the population lives below the poverty line—as a result of the austerity policies of successive regimes has been accompanied by intimidation of opposition parties, repressive laws and rampant violence by the police and military.

Last month, three New Zealand journalists were arrested as they investigated environmental degradation by a Chinese property developer building a new resort on Malolo Island. The journalists were later released, with the police commissioner claiming that they had been arrested by “a small group of rogue officers.”

The day before the arrests, however, the Fiji Parliamentary Reporters’ Handbook was published, affirming constitutional impediments to a free press, in “the interests of national security, public safety, public order, public morality, public health or the orderly conduct of elections.”

The regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, are supporting the anti-democratic actions of the Bainimarama government as they seek to counter the rise of China in the Pacific, which they regard as their own “backyard.”

In a visit to Suva in March, New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters announced that NZ will provide Fiji’s military with an upgraded “package of support,” including training with the NZ military, and an “enhanced partnership” between the NZ Police and the Fiji Police Force. These measures will inevitably be used against the working class.

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