



FIJI TRADES UNION CONGRESS

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FIJI GARMENT INDUSTRY SITUATION

We refer to news report in Fiji Sun on Monday 28th May 2012 (and other media outlets), which is designed to give a positive spin by the President of the Fiji Textile, Clothing & Footwear [TCF] Council, Mr Kalpesh Solanki, that the garment industry is poised for a \$100M boom. Some attractive figures were quoted by him.

The Minister for Industry and Trade (A. S. Khaiyum) is also reported in the same news release to be supportive and he believes Fiji has the potential to become a leader in the garment industry, it does not say whether he meant it to be regionally or globally. All this hype is definitely derived from the blood and sweat of the garment industry workers where 70% of them are women forced to work on low and demeaning wages. Their current rate of wages per Wages Council Order is a measly \$1.65 per hour for Learners, and \$1.96 for Others, i.e. all other class of workers in the garment industry. It is no secret that this was arrived at after a long battle. All garment workers in Fiji today earn and live below the poverty line. Nothing that Fiji ought to be proud off.

The Garment Industry Wages Council had agreed some time ago that the new and revised rates for the workers should be \$1.80 and \$2.15 resp. However, this recommendation has been mysteriously lost somewhere in the system. The Chairman of the Wages Council (Fr K. Barr) has openly declared that the TCF has always opposed such necessary changes and then gone via back door to frustrate the implementation of

the agreed increases. The same applies right now so their boast today for improved future is same old rhetoric and sounds as hollow as ever.

Knowing that the new 2012 UNDP Survey for Vanua Levu shows that over 48% of population there is living below the poverty line (percentage would be similar or more for the whole nation). This is a serious indictment of the Govt and Employers position. It has been determined time and again that one of the basic reasons for poverty in this country is due to the low level of wages paid to the employees. This is reflected starkly to the workers in the Garment Industry.

The FTUC has attempted repeatedly over the decades to bring about the necessary and essential improvements to this situation in a reasonable and progressive manner through normal channels available to us, but we have faced stiff opposition by the Employers particularly the garment industry. Cases of instant dismissal, intimidation, unfair working conditions and even sexual harassment had been reported and recorded, but ignored by the relevant authorities.

As a result, the corporations continued to reap their profit year after year. Their commercial viability, survival and profits since then are direct proof that they record profits yearly and continue to prosper. The latter is achieved on the backs and sweat of the workers in the industry.

In spite of minting annual profits, the Government of the day is supporting them further by providing hard earned tax dollar to the industry to "*market*" themselves overseas. This is unfair to the workers because public funds are being expended on the rich and powerful. Their own bombast proves their viability, so they should pay for their own business marketing costs.

On the other hand, we believe that in light of the subsidy provided, the Government should in return demand that the employers observe fair labour practices and adhere to the core ILO conventions, e.g. C87 & C98, on Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining. This has been purposely delayed or opposed by the TCF employers for years now.

In 2006, the then President of TCF (Mr Ramesh Solanki) stated that over 18000 workers were employed during the heydays of the garment industry in late 1990's and in 2006 that number had dropped to approx 8000 (a drop of 45%). His forecast then was that 5000 more people could be employed if the rules of origin requirements in the SPARTECA accord was changed (*Ref: Pacific Labour Market & Labour Mobility in the Pacific, 2006 SPOCTU Chairman/R. Singh*).

The data contained in the Govt's National News shows that the industry has gone on a downward spiral rather than what it was forecast by the then TCF President. So where is the boom for the garment industry now being broadcast by them.

If the foregoing "good news" and "boom" is a reality, then all stakeholders, in particular the Government and TCF, should take immediate steps to devote some of their energies towards the improvements to the workers remuneration, allowances, working conditions, and the preservation of their rights and interests, under national and international protocols, so that these workers can pursue their legitimate aspirations in a stable industry with peace and dignity. We are ready as ever to play our legitimate role towards that objective.

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