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Fiji Sugar and General Workers Union

22/07/2013

Press Release

Sugar Workers Wage Demand

The Fiji Sugar Corporation's Executive Chairman, Abdul Khan's announcement that workers are to receive a 5.3% wage increase is a sad reflection of his lack of judgment and understanding of the plight of the FSC. Workers have had their real wage decreased by more than 40% over the last 7 years. Adding to this is the fact that crushing seasons have become shorter due to the decline in sugar crop to 1.6 million tons from 3.8 million tons. Majority of workers in the industry work lesser weeks in a year and remain unemployed for longer periods and in many cases up to 8 months a year. No compensation is paid to these workers.

A 5.5% wage adjustment would mean an additional \$8.35 per week in gross wage or \$7.10 a week after VAT. This translates to half a chicken a week for a family. This is no consolation for workers. These workers even after the wage adjustment earn below the poverty line and those that work during the crushing season only, live in extreme poverty. The Union has been demanding a wage review for more than 2 years now. Government had announced in its last budget that all un-established workers in government would receive a minimum of \$10,000 per annum. More recently at the insistence of the Union, the Company started paying meal allowances, night allowances and casual workers their correct rate of pay. In all cases the Company was in breach of the laws and the Collective Agreement.

The Chairman misleads the public once again by declaring that FSC will pay 50% of medical insurance coverage for workers when he knows full well that only staff employees are covered by the insurance scheme and none of the un-established workers are in any medical insurance scheme because they are unable to afford even 50% of the premiums. So there is no joy for the ordinary worker in FSC. Current Agreement requires the Company to pay 35% of the premiums. The Welfare scheme that the Executive Chairman trumpets has been in existence for the last 10 years or so and was the Union's initiative and is nothing new.

The Chairman in an earlier media release falsely claimed that workers were being paid overtime but appears to admit now that after more than 2 years workers will be paid for overtime work. The fact is that workers have not been paid for overtime

work for long periods of time contrary to the requirements of our labour laws. Despite reports to the Ministry of Labour, FSC has not been taken to task for breaching the labour laws while the same Ministry requires Unions to follow the laws strictly.

The Chairman also declared publicly that he would not deal with the Union but with workers directly. The Employment Relations Promulgation obligates the Employer to negotiate collectively in good faith with worker's Unions. Again this is a blatant show of defiance of the laws. FSC is a government owned enterprise and this government without a blink proclaims to respect workers' rights including collective bargaining. Most recently such pronouncements were made in the ILO Conference by the Government representative. The Cotonou Agreement under which Fiji sells sugar to the EU requires respect for fundamental workers' rights. Is this a case of the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing or plain ignorance?

It is time that the Chairman of FSC stops treating Unions with contempt and engage meaningfully to address workers concerns. Until then, the Union will proceed with its secret ballots for strike action. The workers will decide the next course of action. I call on FSC to stop intimidating workers and warning them that government is watching those that take strike action. Management has in all workplaces conducted meetings to warn workers. Such behavior is irresponsible and shameful to say the least, more so when the Chairman claims that "we are all family in FSC".

In the meantime, the Chairman may also wish to explain why during his tenure the administration costs of the FSC Head office has ballooned, substantially exceeding previous budgets. He may also wish to reveal to the public how much he is being paid and if bonuses are also part of the deal. He may also wish to explain why only a particular company is awarded tenders for major works in FSC and also declare his interest in the co-generation project which he is so keen about. After all we are all talking about transparency and accountability.

FELIX ANTHONY



General Secretary
FSG&WU