The Director ILO, Office of the Pacific Island Countries Office, Suva Bro Matin Karimli,
Colleagues from the ILO Office
Our bipartite colleagues from the Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation
Invited Guests, Officials, Delegates & Observers from FTUC Affiliates, Youth Committee
representatives and Women Committee delegates, FTUC Officials and Staff, Brothers, Sisters &
Colleagues.

I extend a very warm welcome to you all at this 48th Biennial Delegates Conference. The
ongoing sad state of the nation continues unabated from both pre-COVID and post COVID.
Our rights as workers, as unions, as union leaders and as citizens of this country have been under
threat since the illegal takeover of Qarase’s democratically elected government in 2006. The
working people and the nation have gravely suffered under the regime which has scant regard for
human and trade union rights with the economy in doldrums. This economic plight is expected
to worsen as more and more workers lose their jobs, and livelihoods as the impact of COVID 19
continues. Last Biennial Conference when we had gathered in Nadi, to plan as an organisation
for our two years, we had no inkling that the next Biennial Conference we would be
exchanging strategy to mitigate the impact of this pandemic, to explore further avenues on how
workers’ rights can be protected even during these times, and how our jobs can be sustained, and
remain decent.
We count on our employer comrades to take into account that whilst businesses need to continue
to operate, workers’ need a source of income. Our economy needs workers to work, earn and
spend. Without consumer spending, the economy comes to a standstill. We have seen the Nadi
town reel from the impact of closure of tourism services, many businesses are shutting down,
similar in other parts of the country.

The government policies in response to this crisis are not many nor are they relevant to the plight
of workers. The provisions to mitigate this crisis such as reducing duties for white goods has not
produced any decline in the cost of living nor is there any reduction in the price of basic food
items that we purchase.
**FNPF**

It is no secret that the Fiji National Provident Fund is used by government as an ATM. Members are given no choice but forced into withdrawing their own funds in order to keep their family surviving during this crisis.

When the FTUC was represented in the FNPF Board, limitations were placed on the fund’s investment into the Tourism industry, not because the FTUC representative had visions of a pandemic such as the one we face, but because it was prudent. Putting too much eggs into one basket was a risk, the board at the time, recognized. Policies were put in place to ensure minimum risk on investment.

After the removal of workers and employers representatives from the board by this regime, interference into management and the board of FNPF resulted in the current 721 million dollars investment into the tourism industry which now fetches no return but has incurred added and unnecessary cost to the FNPF, to the detriment of workers future.

Further this government has ensured the use of hard-earned workers contribution to a point that when workers retire there will be almost nothing to live on in retirement but become a burden to society.

It is now even more important to have workers and employers’ representatives in the FNPF Board to ensure safe keeping of workers fund before FNPF falls into the abyss of no return. We as workers no longer trust this government to look after our retirement funds.

**FIJI AIRWAYS**

Fiji Airways has reported a 61.2 million dollars in profit before tax from its last operating year. Yet it chose to unscrupulously terminate its cabin crew by blatantly ignoring the provisions of the cabin crew collective agreement in paying the agreed redundancy payment of three months basic wages plus two weeks for each year of service.

To add salt to the wound they now advertise vacant positions for the same cabin crew they had unceremoniously terminated. This time around they will issue low paying individual contracts and remove all sustainable terms and conditions of employment. This is what an irresponsible employer looks like. Fiji Airways should no longer expect support from workers and citizens of this country. The silence of this government in the mistreatment of workers is deafening.
When the ministry of health falsely accused a Fiji Airways cabin crew of bringing COVID-19 into the country, the airline conveniently abandoned its worker knowing that prior to the false accusation the airline had not taken any policy on protective measures despite the cabin crew union reminding the company that there ought to be guidelines and precautions taken for flight attendants.

**ATS**

Air Terminal Services treatment of its workers is another example of blatant disregard to the collective agreement and the rule of law where workers were unscrupulously terminated with no regards to the fact, they were shareholders of the company. No one is under any illusion that the directives against ATS workers were from government, similar to the case of Fiji Airways workers.

Delegates and friends, the tourism sector is almost come to a stand-still now. Local tourism is being promoted. Fijians are lured to visit resorts due to reduced rates offered by the industry. But we all know, that is not sufficient to keep our people in the hotels in employment. The ADB in its Pacific Economic Monitor launched on July 30th mentioned that the impact of COVID-19 on Fiji's tourism industry and its related sectors is projected to result in negative 16 percentage points to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2020. Fiji's tourism industry is projected to return to pre-COVID-19 levels only by 2023, provided a vaccine is identified or borders reopened this year. The tourism industry employs approximately 150,000 people directly and indirectly. It is extraordinary times and we must all put our hands and minds together to devise the best way forward.

The ADB has indicated Fijian economy is expected to contract by 21.7 percent in 2020 mainly due to poor tourism activity and its knock-on effects to the rest of the economy.

**Colleagues, the worse is yet to come;**

COVID-19 and the new normal will bring about changes to the working world. Rates of pay and new conditions of employment may be needed to initially counter the negative economic effect brought by the virus which emanated from Wuhan in China.
While the future is uncertain, one thing is certain. Trade Unions are here to stay. Be it a pandemic or an earthquake or a cyclone, or an anti-union regime, we have a role to play. Under several decrees and anti-union regulations, we have remained firm. We must review our direction and charter new pathways into the new world of work. We need to unselfishly pool our resources together with the best way forward, in order to better serve the membership and ensure the long term survival of the trade union movement. Existing in small unions severely limits the ability of the union to fully serve the membership and to stand up for fundamental rights particularly at a time like this, where our rights are relentlessly threatened.

We must strive towards merging unions so that they have resources and are well equipped to serve our membership to the best of expectations.

Decrees like the Essential National Industry Decree, the States Services Decree, Administration of Justice Decree, and Public Order Amendment Decree make us more determined, stronger and united in fighting workers rights. Our leaders were arrested and detained, union officials were harassed. Our headquarters was raided, office equipment and records taken and staff harassed. Some of our members were brought to court.

We won those battles. Some are yet to be won. Our National Secretary remains charged for creating public anxiety. The period under review saw the FICTU and FTUC merge. In February 2019, we held a Special Conference to incorporate this development. We also made 8 applications to march peacefully. They were denied and we all know why? When they allowed us to march in Nadi to protest against the lockout of ATS workers, Nadi town was brought to a standstill as workers marched, residents showed support, that scared government. This is the reason why we will never get approval despite numerous applications.

This denial is a serious breach of our fundamental and democratic rights as citizens of this country. This government must be held to answer for it. Nevertheless, our determination remains steadfast in the face of these challenges.
Brothers and Sisters, our campaign to secure workers rights in this country continues. the government has remained silent on our proposals for national minimum age. There were no consultations on individual contracts, short term contracts or even re-applying for your own jobs. With our right to strike taken away, the labour law review incomplete, the agreements signed at the ILO not talked about anymore, and as you all are aware the issues of FASA, and the Vatukoula Gold Mine still remain unresolved, in fact deteriorated. These campaign issues are part of our agenda of this meeting.

Delegates, we have taken out our precious weekend time, to be here today. Let us use this Forum to make some strong decisions. The past year has been very different to what we have usually experienced. Our strength is in our unity. This conference must come out with a strong set of outcomes that will pave the way for us. We must not, and we will not waver, because it is a pandemic that we never knew of. We must remain adamant and concerned about our members, about jobs, about decent jobs. We must not allow this pandemic to be used as an opportunity for those who want to exploit.

The International Labour standards must always be defended and upheld.

Before I conclude I wish to remind all workers that we must take serious interest in our politics that’s what democracy is about.

You represent the majority in any community when you add your families, relatives and friends. It is your vote that determines you and your children’s future. Vote wisely.

I thank you once again for your time to grace our Conference and look forward to your active participation in the agenda discussions today. In solidarity,

Vinaka.