

FPSA 75th anniversary

Ni sa bula vinaka comrades

Let me start by acknowledging everyone in this room who has made such an important contribution to our trade union movement. Brother Rajeshwar, Sister Judith – the members of the FPSA council, ILO Director for the PI, Donglin Li, our brother Mahen Choudary and, most importantly, all the delegates here who contribute their time and solidarity to FPSA even when there are pressures against your participation.

It is a great honour to be invited to share in your prestigious 75th anniversary celebrations and to extend the solidarity of PSI's 20 million members. It's an honour because FPSA is undoubtedly one of the most respected and important unions in the Pacific Islands – a beacon of light and hope in often dark times. Through the struggle and determination of the FPSA membership, you have consistently defended the rights of workers to enjoy a decent living, the right of all Fijians to access quality public services as well as the right to genuine participatory democracy – workplace democracy, social dialogue and representative democracy governed by the rule of law.

Ensuring the survival of the union through multiple coups, subsequent imposition of austerity and public sector cuts and repeated and sustained violations of trade union rights is a remarkable feat.

From your beginnings in 1943,

To the first, ground-breaking strike action of '73,

The strikes in the 80s that shut the airports in response to the government accepting the IMF's advice to impose a 2 year wage freeze.,

The Establishment and leadership of the CPSU to ensure a coordinated and more powerful voice for all public sector unions.

And to the repeated actions to restore democracy, a voice for workers and defending human rights.

You should all be immensely proud to be part of such a powerful, democratic movement that has been fundamental in shaping the history of Fiji. Public services and trade unions are able to fundamentally change lives, ensure human rights are realised and shape the world we live in. They certainly have for me.

Comrades, we are living in a moment of both crises and opportunity. We are facing a crisis of inequality, a climate crises and a crisis of democracy. And Fiji been hit by all 3. Around the world we are experiencing a rise in autocratic leaders using excuses of nationalism, of racial politics, stoking fears of migrant workers or refugees, of women and even of human rights – to justify their grab for power and policies that benefit the richest 1%, multi-national corporations and their allies.

The growth of autocratic, authoritarian leaders is not a coincidence. It's a sign that our global economic system is crumbling, that the myth of trickledown economics is no longer believed. Around the world workers are realising that the global economic model of neoliberalism – has delivered unprecedented profits to the richest people and the growth of multinationals, but has forced down wages, has reduced access to public services, has damaged democracy and has dramatically increased inequality.

This week marks the 10 year anniversary of the Global Financial Crises. Lehman Brothers was declared bankrupt and the excesses of the billionaire class led to a crisis that workers are still paying for. Governments bailed out banks and multinational companies but workers around the world were left on the scrapheap. Ten years of austerity followed. Since then wages have stagnated and the gap between wages and profits has widened. In the past 10 years 90% of new wealth has gone to the 1%.

Last year Inequality was reported as being so high that only 8 men have as much wealth as the world's 3.6 billion poorest people in the world. This inequality isn't just unfair, it's destroying our public services.

There is more wealth in the world than ever before, yet governments say they don't have enough money to invest in public services, don't have enough money to pay living wages to the workers delivering public services. When

governments fail to invest in public services we are told that the only answer is to let the private sector run those services. With so much wealth to invest the private sector has identified public services as a goldmine. Governments guarantee them a steady flow of cash and they cut wages, cut service delivery and charge prices on what are often monopolies. PSI is committed to working with you to stop the threat to your public hospitals in Latoka and Bor. Healthcare is forecast to be the largest growing industry with large employment needs. Almost every private equity firm intends to increase their health portfolio substantially. Samsung see health as their most potentially profitable growth area. There is no limit to the extent that capitalists are willing to profit from ill-health and other people's tragedies – driving up medicine prices, re-directing health research into the most profitable, are often the most superficial health services.

Governments are failing to tax corporations properly and a global system to avoid tax is making it far more profitable for multinational corporations to operate than local businesses. At least 30 trillion dollars is sitting in tax havens. 30 trillion dollars that could be used to build and properly staff hospitals, schools, that could build the new renewable energy sectors we need, that could ensure we transition to a low carbon economy and support climate resilience.

While workers salaries have stagnated, the salary of CEOs has risen exponentially. Executive pay has increased by 72% since the financial crises while wages have barely moved and more and more workers are working precariously. Salaries of CEO's in the healthcare industry have risen even faster.

Yet the wealthy and powerful are now telling the story that the only choices we have are to support autocratic, racist nationalism and a protectionist economy, or to double down on neoliberalism and support even greater deregulation. And they are making sure that we can't reverse policies of privatisation or introduce new regulations to protect workers, public health, local economies and the environment by signing Trade agreements that guarantee governments will keep pro-foreign capital laws and policies.

So - How can we stop inequality rising and reverse it?

It's clear – We can stop and reverse inequality by providing quality public services, by making sure corporations and the rich are taxed and pay for the real costs of their operations (including the impacts on the environment), by electing governments whose sole purpose is to serve the people and not big business, and, critically, by having strong unions.

Even the IFIs whose very purpose is to promote a neoliberal economic order and are promoting the privatisation of hospitals here in Fiji, have now acknowledged that higher trade union density reduces inequality, makes wages higher for both union and non-union workers and also reduces the gender wage gap.

When trade union membership is high enough, we also play a critical role in shaping both economic and social policies of governments – achieving critical health and safety protections, lifelong education, universal public services and critically ensuring a voice for workers.

But the number of workers in trade unions has been dropping, we have not been strong enough globally to demand and achieve a fairer economic system. For PSI growing our collective power is a priority. We must grow our power 3 ways – by better understanding and using the power we have, by supporting our affiliates to grow bring in new members but also organise new sectors, and to increase the number of unions willing to work in solidarity (by joining PSI but also by ending wasteful union conflict).

The good news is that we can do this.

Around the world faith in the neoliberal economic order of corporate capitalism is crumbling. People are yearning for a fairer, kinder, more caring world.

Our challenge is to lead that future – to create a vision for a better world, a fairer global economic system and to show the public that unions are not created to exercise power for a few, they are not a vehicle to political careers, they are a beautiful act of solidarity

We are a force for good. We are the most democratic institution or movement that allows working people and their families to have a say in decisions that affect them – in their workplace and in their communities, in the economic and social policies that ultimately impact on us all, but also in the kind of world we want to live in, and we want others to live in.

A number of successful, growing unions have shaped themselves around - Social Movement Unionism. SMU means unions are active in struggling for social justice as well as the wages and conditions of their members. Unions have a proud history of playing a key role in ending apartheid, in campaigning against wars, in advancing women's rights, in protecting the environment and by acts of solidarity with workers in other countries and industries and migrant workers, precarious workers, workers throughout the global labour supply chain. This model means unions need to connect with other social movements and with the communities who are also in need of and willing to defend our public services. When we work with others we grow our power and their power. Public service workers are in a unique position to connect to the broader community, listen to them and share stories of better futures. We must be willing to champion the rights of all people, that we are for the many, not the few.

Trade unions have, can and must play a role in advancing gender equality. Too many people see trade unions as reflecting the interests of men. PSI is committed to gender equality, not just in the numbers of delegates in governance and in meetings, but in the work we do to make sure that we bargain for better conditions for women – from equal pay, maternity leave to new provisions like paid leave for domestic violence survivors. But we also play a critical role in making sure public services are designed to better support women, to challenge patriarchy and to end rampant sexual harassment and violence. Remember “the standard you walk past is the standard you accept”. The success of the Rugby 7s shows us that strength grows when we are more connected to communities, when we set high standards for ourselves, when we commit to genuine solidarity.

Young people are yearning to join movements that reflect the issues they care about – from climate change to university costs, gender equality and a fairer future. Recent research in Australia shows that people trust unions more than governments, the majority want unions to be strong and active and many would join if approached.

If we want young people to join unions we must reflect the issues that matter to them and we must make space for them not just to join, but to act. Unions are healthy when they are active, when their members are involved in making decisions and organising others. Unions are designed to make workers feel powerful, connected, to feel respected. Organising models that ensure that all workers, no matter if they are migrant workers, precarious, outsourced or temporary workers, can belong and feel part of a movement are working around the world. With a re-emergence of left wing movements and a clearer rejection of neoliberalism in the UK and the US, young people are joining, organising and steering unions into new directions.

PSI has made young workers a priority and altered our constitution to ensure they have a voice and help chart our future.

People want to belong. They want to contribute to making a better future. They have to be convinced that unions are part of that better future, for them, their children, their countries future and increasingly for the planet.

Fiji and the Pacific Islands are in a unique place to lead the union movement globally on climate change. You can lead on defining what a just transition to a fairer, low carbon economy should look like and how our public services should be designed to address climate change. A truly just transition is really another way of talking about solidarity. And countries like mine have failed in our obligation to act in solidarity in relation to climate change. But if the union movement leads we can show that the crisis of climate change and the crisis of inequality are borne from the same cause – an exploitative global economic system that focuses on the growth of profits rather than the growth of wellbeing. We can also show that a fairer economy that delivers public services to all is also a more sustainable economy.

Comrades. I want to leave you with the following thought. Fiji is such a remarkably friendly, warm place to come. Despite the challenges people approach others with such kindness and love. And it is this warmth, this care for others that embodies our purpose. Unions, I think, are an institutional form of love. A collective commitment to act

together, for each other to create a better, fairer, kinder community. Solidarity is an act of love. We can grow our movement, our power and grow a better world when we embody that Fijian sense of solidarity – of Ve lomani.

Finally Happy Birthday FPSA, PSI is proud to have you as an affiliate and look forward to celebrating many more birthdays together.

Vinaka