

News/ Fiji

Strike for a hike

Workers in the State-owned Pacific Fishing Company (PAFCO) win a significant victory, after they struck work to demand improved wages and working conditions.

About 350 workers struck work at the State-owned Pacific Fishing Company (PAFCO), on the island of Levuka on 4 August 2003. The strike was to demand improved wages and working conditions. The workers, mainly indigenous women, were amongst the lowest paid in Fiji, earning about US\$42 per week, wages well below poverty line. Over the past eight years, there had been a string of arbitration rulings ordering the company to improve pay and working conditions, but both the government and the employer had appealed these decisions.

These include arbitration rulings in 1996 by former Permanent Arbitrator and Judge of the High Court, high chief Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, and in April this year, by Arbitrator G.P. Lala. There has also been a High Court judgement in January 2002 in the workers' favour. However, PAFCO's only response was to drag the matter back to court.

To support the cause of the workers, two NGOs, the Pacific Network on Globalization (PANG) and the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy, called for an international consumer boycott of PAFCO products. They urged consumers not to buy PAFCO products with labels such as Sun Bell, Koro Sea, Ovalau Blue and Old Capital Special. They also planned to launch an overseas campaign to boycott Bumble Bee's products, which include the Bumble Bee and Clover Leaf brand labels.

It is worth noting that PAFCO underwent a significant overhaul in 2000 after Bumble Bee, North America's largest canned seafood company, signed on as a strategic partner. Bumble Bee has a seven-year agreement with PAFCO for the processing of 30,000 tonnes of tuna loins a year.



The strike was finally resolved after nearly two months, on 24 September 2003, after Pacific Fishing Company (PAFCO) agreed to pay out an additional FJD\$2 million (US\$1 million) annually in wages. Unskilled workers are now to receive a new hourly rate of FJD\$2.75 (US\$1.50) and skilled workers of FJD\$3.50 (US\$1.90). The company claims that, with this new deal, workers here will be among the highest paid in the industry and in any developing country.

This article has been compiled from various sources, including media releases from NGOs, Pacific Network on Globalization (PANG) (pang@connect.com.fj) and Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy (ECREA).

News/ Fiji**Shameful indictment**

A speech by Senator Atu Emberson Bain in the Fiji Senate on 12 September 2003, described in graphic detail the conditions of workers in PAFCO.

Yet another example can be found in the government-owned tuna cannery at Levuka, where between 800 and 1000 indigenous people, mostly women, work. A sizeable proportion have worked at PAFCO for between 20-30 years, and it is these same women who are now entering the sixth week of an industrial strike against the company. They are mostly mothers, from villages all around Ovalau extending as far as Lovoni in the interior, and along the coast from Bureta all the way down through the Qalivakabau network of villages, then across to the other side of Levuka as far as Rukuruku.

With wages well below the poverty line, PAFCO's women carry the heavy burden of feeding their families, sending their children to school, and meeting all their church and traditional obligations. Many have dependent husbands. They struggle under the weight of large debts to the bank. These have resulted from a highly questionable system of unsecured loans arranged by PAFCO with Westpac many years ago to supplement (or should I say subsidise) its low wages. The bank loans have condemned many women to a vicious cycle of indebtedness, particularly during the years when interest was set at a crippling 16 per cent.

The working environment also falls short in many respects. I have walked through the production process, both before and after the recent renovations, and seen the lines of women standing on the production line throughout the shift, their hands working furiously to skin and clean the tuna, or to label and package. There are no allowances made for pregnant women. They also have to stand for hours on end. The heavy blanket of heat, the deafening noise of machinery, and the stench of fish meal, are part of the daily work routine. So is the pressure to work at a frenzied pace for fear of losing their jobs.

The renovations of a few years ago have brought some improvement, but the problems of heat and continuous standing remain. There is now a child-care facility funded by UNIFEM and run by PAFCO, but it levies a weekly charge of \$7.50 or \$30 a month per child, which is automatically deducted from pay-packets. When a child is sick and stays at home, or during paid or public holidays, I am told that the deductions remain the same. The mothers still have to pay \$7.50 per child.

Sir, the role of these village women in the development of Ovalau has long been recognised by chiefs of the island. For some, including the chiefs of Lovoni, Bureta, Tukou, Draiba, and Toki, there is a deep sense of sadness, shame and indignation about the way their women have been treated by the company. I know this because I have recorded their views. Active support from a number of chiefs for the current strike testifies to just how strongly they feel. And it is not the first time they have done this.

Sir, the treatment meted out to PAFCO's women is a shameful indictment of our so-called development process, and the wage policies of successive governments. These are Fijian women who are the backbone of growth in our industrial fisheries sector, and who are employed in a 'government' owned tuna cannery, yet they are consigned to poverty wages of less than \$80 gross a week in 2003.

The fish they process is marketed in places like the United Kingdom and Canada, under well known labels like Sainsbury and John West, so there is no question of it being a low grade product. It is at the top of the international market. Yet our women are paid a pittance.

Sir, the women of PAFCO and their union have been forced to engage the industrial relations machinery against PAFCO, and to resort to much more costly legal proceedings in the High Court in order to seek remedy for unfair dismissals and exploitative wages. They have had a number of important judgements delivered in their favour, notably arbitration rulings in 1996 by eminent former Permanent Arbitrator and Judge of the High Court, high chief Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, and in April this year, by Arbitrator G.P. Lala. There has also been an important High Court judgement in January 2002.

The G.P. Lala arbitration tribunal awarded a substantial wage increase, an increase in allowances, and equal wages for both men and women employees.

But instead of implementing these rulings, which would have brought long overdue justice to this group of workers, PAFCO's response has been to oppose them, and to drag the matter back to court.

In fact, none of the awards in favour of Fijian workers at PAFCO have seen the full light of day, because each one of them has been challenged by this government company. It is now over one and a half years since the High Court judgement of Justice Byrne, and six years since the Arbitration award was granted by Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi. The GP Lala award has met a similar fate.

Sir, PAFCO is a government company accountable to the public. It should not be allowed to play games, use delaying tactics, or circumvent court judgements it doesn't like. This is tantamount to abusing the legal process. Where is the justice when a state company goes to such lengths, and at considerable cost to taxpayers, to deny workers a decent living wage and dignified conditions of employment? What kind of affirmative action or blueprint is this when the government would rather go back to court to defeat a wage increase for Fijian workers living below the poverty line?

Sir, much more can be said about the disgraceful situation at PAFCO, but I will save this for later in the week, when we debate a motion that I have filed on PAFCO, along with Senator Felix Anthony who spoke at some length on the current strike. I am convinced that the Senate can play a constructive role here.

Senator Atu Emberson Bain can be contacted at fonumelino@connect.com.fj

News/ Uganda

Stricken by AIDS

A study finds that in Uganda, as a result of HIV-AIDS, men's involvement in fishing declined by 14 per cent and that of women in fishing processing by 24 per cent

By Esther Nakkazi of *The East African*

The high prevalence of HIV-AIDS among Uganda's fishing communities has adversely affected the sector, leading to a sharp drop in production. Quoting a study released recently by the National Agricultural Advisory Services of Uganda (NAADS), the Minister of State for Agriculture, Kibirige Ssebunya, said that 26 per cent of the 3,879 people in the study's population were infected with HIV-AIDS and related illnesses, with 486 having died over the past five years. The study was carried out by the NAADS with support from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's Integrated Support to Sustainable Development and Food Security Programme. The aim was to assess the non-health effects of HIV-AIDS on individuals, households and communities.

The study was based on a survey of smallholder agricultural rural households at six sites in the Lake Victoria Crescent agro-ecological zone, representing the fisheries and pastoral agriculture subsectors. Households were asked to provide comparative data for the five-year period between 1997 and 2002. Forty-three per cent of affected households reported a reduction in the annual catch, a figure higher than that for unaffected ones by 20 per cent.

The survey found that men's involvement in fishing declined by 14 per cent, while that of women in fish processing went down by 24 per cent. Households were spending six per cent less time on fishing and making up the shortfall with male hired labour.

As a result of HIV-AIDS, men had resorted to shallow-water fishing with reduced night-time fishing. Women fisherfolk, on the other hand, were producing a lower quality of smoked and salted fish or altogether abandoning these processes because they are labour-intensive and detrimental to health. Instead, they were shifting to sun drying. Sun-dried fish has a lower market price than the salted or smoked variety, leading to an overall lowering of income. Due to poor smoking, a significant proportion of the catch was rotting and being turned into animal feed, which fetched lower prices.

The study also revealed that, because of limited resources, HIV-AIDS-affected households could not invest in modern technology, fishing boats and gear.

This piece is based on Esther Nakkazi's article in The East African (Nairobi), 1 December 2003

News/ Nigeria

Caring for the little ones

Efforts are on in Edo State, Nigeria, to develop nurseries for the children of women fish vendors

By Okechukwu Kanu of *This Day*

Fish markets in most parts of the developing world, including Nigeria, are unhygienic and difficult places for small children accompanying their fish-vending mothers. In almost no market are there any facilities to cater to the needs of the children of market women. It is in this context that the Edo State Women's Association (ESWA) came up with an idea to build a market traders' day nursery. ESWA plans to work with market women's associations to set up and manage in Edo State markets, daycare centres for children up to four years of age.

According to ESWA, "Markets are not child-friendly places. Traders and female porters who are mothers of young babies and toddlers cope as best as they can, but often to the detriment of the children. Provision of childcare is often too expensive for many of market women, and the hours are also unsuitable."

ESWA further observes that, because many of the children are strapped to their mother's backs for long



periods, they are slow to meet their developmental milestones such as crawling, walking and running. "On the whole, hygiene conditions in markets are not conducive for the health and growth of young children. Some traders and porters have resorted to leaving their babies at home or in the market in the care of underaged girl-children between the ages of 5 and 14. The implication for these girl-children is that they are unable to attend school, with grave poverty implications for them when they grow up," ESWA says. ESWA has held preliminary talks with leaders of the market women's association and they have agreed to pilot a small-scale nursery/ crèche for up to 40 children. The association is also seeking funding to get the project on track. Already, some French delegates have shown interest in the project and are looking at ways to collaborate with ESWA.

This is summarized from an article by Okechukwu Kanu in This Day, Lagos, 7 October 2003