

**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.

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