

**ACTU Supplementary Submission to the Senate Inquiry
into Australia's Relationships with Papua New Guinea
and other Pacific Islands Countries**

27 March 2003

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. The ACTU appreciates this opportunity to meet the Committee and asks that this supplementary submission be received as a tabled document. This inquiry is welcomed by the ACTU.
- 1.2. Australia is now confronted with a rim of instability to the north that is profound, multifaceted and exceptionally complex. Largely ignored or overlooked in the globalised debate on the issues of trade, security and development, Australia plays a very particular and sensitive role. And it will require the committed creativity and resources of all the parties, whether government or civil society, to define and respond to that role.
- 1.3. Failed states (*"The Pacific first failed state"*, Economist, 15/2/03); states deteriorating, (*"Mystery Island: the news from Nauru is not good"*, Economist, 8/3/03); some on the brink of collapse (*"PNG on brink of economic, political collapse – report"*, ABC Public Record, 19/3/03); and terrorism (*"Pacific states are likely havens for terror"*, Financial Review, 23/10/02), characteristically and dramatically describe one dimension of this rim of instability.
- 1.4. Unions are uniquely placed to play their role both in terms of Australian union relationships with Pacific unions, but also in the role the Pacific unions can play in contributing to good governance, economic well being and political stability. Unions cross gender, age, cultural, religious, racial, and class lines; they include white collar and blue collar members; professional staff, farmers, skilled and semi-skilled workers; and they have a stake in, and are committed to, economic growth and development, as well as political stability. They are recognised as one of the integral parts of civil society.

2. TRADE UNIONS AND THE REGION

- 2.1. Australian unions with most of the Pacific Island unions, including New Zealand, are members of a number of international regional and subregional groupings of unions.
- 2.2. The most significant of these is the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and its regional organisation, the Asia-Pacific Regional Organisation (APRO: membership – New Caledonia, Vanuatu, PNG, Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, French Polynesia, Tonga, Cooks Islands, New Zealand and Australia). In addition there is a sub-regional grouping of unions – the South Pacific and Oceania Council of Trade Unions (SPOCTU) which includes all of the Pacific Island states except the USA territories.
- 2.3. All of the national union centres in the Commonwealth countries in the Pacific – are members of the Commonwealth Trade Union Council (CTUC).

- 2.4. In addition, many of the sector unions, for example, teacher or transport unions in the Pacific, are members of their particular, Global Union Federation (GUF), such as Education International and International Transport Federation.
- 2.5. Where their government is a member of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), unions participate in ILO activities.
- 2.6. For the first time, the Pacific Islands Communities Forum is currently establishing a process of effective consultation with regional non-state actors (NSAs) including unions.
- 2.7. The complexity and the challenges confronting the region, and the need to effectively utilise all available resources, means that the Australian Government will need to re-examine the role of civil society organisations and institutions in its relations with the Pacific Island Communities (PICs).
- 2.8. The United Nations Developed Programme (UNDP) has noted that *“governance issues have become central to the agenda of PIC (Pacific Island Communities) governments”* and concluded that *“the absence of strong civil society organisations and watch dog agencies has contributed to the deteriorating quality and integrity of governance in most of the countries in the subregion”*.
- 2.9. Australian unions, with very few resources and limited access to Australian Government funding, are endeavouring to co-operate with Pacific unions in developing their capacities and skills to effectively participate in ensuring effective governance, economic development and protection of their rights, not only at national levels, but regionally and internationally.

3. AUSTRALIAN UNIONS AND THE REGION

- 3.1. The ACTU and its affiliates have an ongoing relationship with the PIC national unions. That involvement includes:
 - material and financial assistance in times of national disasters, for example, the recent cyclone in Fiji.
 - assistance with displaced persons, for example, assistance to unions following the recent coup in Fiji which resulted in significant displacement of farmers.
 - delegations either together with or on behalf of national or regional organisations.
 - developing capacities to participate in the industrial relations systems.
 - provision of skills and expertise particularly in areas of specialisation, for example, forestry standards, industrial legislation, and occupational health and safety.

- 3.2. The ACTU is currently waiting approval by the Australian Government to begin implementing a major capacity building programme with PNG unions, which has been funded by the Australian Government and approved and supported by the ILO.
- 3.3. The ACTU international aid and development programme, Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA, has projects in Bougainville (training for sustainable agriculture techniques, tools and training for vocational training, small scale hydro-energy planning), PNG (HIV/AIDS), Solomons Islands (tools for vocational training in three centres in Guadalcanal and Makira; technical support for a follow up study of graduates from vocational training centres, support for vocational centres through fee support grants, funding of short courses, and youth leadership funded by the Australian Government through AusAID), and a small programme about to begin for West Papuans (funding of two health workers to attend HIV/AIDS training courses in Australia).
- 3.4. A number of the Global Union Federations, with staff based in Australia, provide capacity building assistance to Pacific unions. The International Federation of Building and Wood Workers (IFBWW) with staff based in Melbourne operates training and education programmes in Vanuatu, Samoa, Solomon Islands and PNG. One of the most significant contributions made by an Australian unions is by the Maritime Union Australia (MUA) which is instrumental through the International Transport Federation (ITF) in ensuring the successful outcome of the agreement which enables seafarers from Kiribati and Tuvalu to serve on ships of the German merchant fleet. Remittances from seafarers flowing out of this agreement are critical for the economic well being of these two islands.
- 3.5. The Committee's attention will have been drawn to the situation of HIV/AIDS in the region. The ACTU's aid and development unit has developed considerable expertise and skills on the issue. With the support of AusAID and Australian unions it has conducted extensive work-based programmes in South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, (with unions, youth, church and women's groups), as well as a number of countries in Asia and the Pacific including Vietnam, the Philippines, Cambodia and New Caledonia.
- 3.6. Currently Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA, is developing a pilot, work-based project with unions in PNG, and is in discussions with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) regarding a pilot survey in a selected number of Pacific countries on workplace HIV education and policy initiatives. While Australia has made a significant contribution to combating HIV/AIDS in the region very little has been devoted to work-based programmes.
- 3.7. Given the increasing concern with terrorism in the region, the International Transport Federation (ITF), with its member unions in the region, together with the ACTU has been actively campaigning to pressure Tonga to close its shipping register ("FOC – flag of convenience"). This is not only in line with the general campaign against FOC shipping, but follows revelations

that Tongan flagged ships have been involved in illegal movement of people and arms smuggling. The move by the Solomon Island's Government to set up an open shipping register is viewed with considerably concern by Australian and Pacific unions, as well as by the ITF.

- 3.8. The ACTU is currently in preliminary and very initial discussions with the Fiji – Australia Foundation involving a pilot project bringing into Australia on short-term contracts, workers from Fiji to assist in harvesting fruit and vegetable crops. The proposal is with the appropriate employer organisations prior to discussion with the Australian Government.

4. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND THE ILO

- 4.1. The ACTU believes that the International Labour Organisation (ILO) with its Pacific base in Suva and its regional organisation base in Manila, has considerable technical expertise and access to all of its social partners – government, employers and unions, and should be more effectively supported by the Australian Government. The ILO is a tripartite organisation, with governments, employer organisations and unions as members.
- 4.2. The role of employer organisations and unions in both Australia and the Pacific is one significant dimension in actively developing more effective relations with the PICs as they play a significant role in contributing to economic development and political stability in the Pacific.

5. TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT

- 5.1. A major issue confronting all civil society organisations in the Pacific, including unions, is the impact of globalised trade developments. WTO, TRIPS, GATS, bilateral free trade agreements, and regional structures and processes, will all have implications for every day life of communities in the region. To our knowledge, no resources are being provided to enable civil society generally, and unions in particular, to participate in the process. It is important therefore that resources are available to enable them to understand what is happening and to effectively contribute and participate in the trade development process.
- 5.2. As noted above, HIV poses a major threat to several countries in the Pacific, first and foremost PNG. Introduction of medicines for HIV and its opportunistic infections (alongside the rebuilding of adequate health delivery services) can save thousands of lives, avert new infections, and have positive economic impact. It is vital that Australia assists PNG and other Pacific Island nations to introduce legislation that will enable the importation of sustainable supplied of affordable medicines for HIV and other public health threats. Additionally, the AusAID bilateral HIV programme in PNG should facilitate as a matter of urgency, the introduction of prophylactic and antiretroviral therapies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Australian Government, through the National Labour Consultative Council (made up of representatives of government, employer organisations and unions), initiate and convene a tripartite round table to develop a strategy for strengthening relationships with Pacific counter part organisations. Such a strategy could include, enhancing the capacities of employer and union organisations as integral parts of democratic institutional development; contributing to the development of effective industrial relations systems; and expanding the effectiveness of the ILO's Decent Work agenda in the Pacific.
2. That, given the significant difficulties for unions and other parts of civil society, to understand and participate in the globalised trade process including the WTO, as well as the regional trade arrangements, the Australian Government should increase the availability of its expertise, skills and financial resources to enable both Pacific governments and civil society, to develop their capacity to effectively participate and contribute in the negotiation process.
3. That, as work-based programmes have been shown to be an effective element of a broad-based HIV/AIDS campaign, the Australian Government should ensure that in its funding of combating HIV/AIDS in the region, there are resources available to both employers and unions in implementing the ILO's "Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work", and that Australian-funded HIV programmes facilitate the rapid introduction of affordable and sustainable generic medicines for HIV.
4. That, the Australian Government, as a member of the Pacific Island Communities Forum actively encourage and support the implementation of the "Framework for Engagement with Non State Actors" which is a major instrument for involving civil society in Pacific Island developments.