

The Loss of the Carefully Nurtured Ethnic Unity of the Labour Movement in Fiji

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Abstract

Trade unions were established in Fiji from the 1930s but it was only in the 1950s that the union movement brought ethnic Fijians and Fiji Indians together, as class solidarity challenged ethnic alignments. After independence trade unions received formal recognition. This, however, led to the emergence of a 'labour aristocracy' in the urban areas which politicized the union movement in the mid-1980s and formed the Fiji Labour Party (FLP), against the wishes of several blue collar unions. Besides the FLP went into an opportunistic alliance with the National Federation Party which was no longer pro-worker. The only thing the two parties (FLP and NFP) had in common was their wish to get rid of the ethnic Fijian-dominated Alliance government. The FLP soon lost its multiracial image and with that its credibility. Moreover, it affected the carefully nurtured ethnic unity of the labour movement.

Introduction

Worker solidarities had started emerging in Fiji from the 1950s, uniting ethnic Fijian and Indian workers against the European business establishment. This gave a rude shock to the vested interests as it had never anticipated such a development (Bain, 1989:13). The earliest resistance to European commercial exploitation perhaps came from Apolosi R. Nawai, a Fijian commoner from western Viti Levu. His movement (during WWI) was seen as an attack on the chiefly system though what Nawai was trying to do was

to do away with the European middlemen in trying to sell bananas (McNaught, 1979).

Brij Lal has noted that the causes Nawai championed, which involved fighting 'the ethos and ideology of British colonialism ... earned him the wrath of the colonial establishment and the Fijian chiefs, and they eventually combined to defeat him and his vision for the future of the Fijian people' (Lal, 1992: 48).

According to Lal, at the heart of Nawai's message was a desire to better the lives of the Fijian people. Nawai, however, like other Fijian leaders after him, also made racist utterances about Indians though 'he was not alone in wanting to "rid Fiji of Indians"' (Lal, 1992:48). Moreover, this showed that Fijians were already wary of Indian presence in Fiji. These were not the chiefly leaders alone but commoners, some of whom, like Nawai, came from the western provinces.

Early Unions

Except for an association of European civil servants, there were no formal trade unions in Fiji until the 1930s (Anderson, 1977: 4). In 1920 and again in 1921, Indian workers had struck demanding higher wages. Fijians were sympathetic to them and even helped them by accommodating them in their villages. As a result, European planters and businessmen, who so far had paid little attention to the Fijians after cession, started using them against the Indians following the policy of 'divide and rule'. In 1920, two hundred Lauans were recruited to form an auxiliary force (Gillion, 1977: 28). During the 1921 strike, the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) recruited Fijian labourers 'at higher wages than it paid to Indians even though they were less efficient' (Gillion, 1977: 60). Two hundred and fifty Bauans were enrolled as special constables and posted to the strike area (Gillion, 1977: 60).

In the 1930s, the colonial government urged all colonies to introduce legislation giving legal rights to trade unions. The response from Fiji was slow because there was resistance from companies like CSR; the colonial government did not act to regulate labour organizations until 1942 when a Department of Labour was set up and the trade union movement received formal recognition (Lawson, 1991: 159).

The colonial government gave workers freedom to form unions, but it provided 'no legal frame to allow compulsory recogni-

tion of unions' as the state 'in collusion with capital undermined any real possibilities towards collective bargaining' (Plange, 1986: 15). Such legal recognition of unions through legislation came only in 1976, a few years after Independence.

It has been suggested that personal advancement in the political sphere was a strong motive for involvement by Fiji Indian leaders in union activities. Because Fiji voters could not be a source of political support, (owing to communal voting) they received little attention from Fiji's Indian leaders. There are, however, some exceptions. In 1959, B. D. Lakshman (an Indian) formed the Fiji Trade Union Congress. His associates in the new organization were James Anthony, Apisai Tora, and Michael Columbus (Hince, 1990: 18). The four of them belonged to four different ethnic groups (James Anthony is part Indian, Apisai Tora is Fijian and Michael Columbus is part-European/Fijian). A small group like that was not indicative of a general trend but at least it was a start.

The unions were ethnically based initially because of the pattern of employment 'but overt racial exclusion clauses were not common until the late 1950s' (Anderson, 1977: 9). After the 1959 riots in Suva by the Wholesale and Retail Workers General Union (WRWGU) members under Apisai Tora and James Anthony when Fijian chiefs intervened to calm the rioters, ethnically exclusive unions for Fijians were actively encouraged by the establishment.

Aftermath of the 1959 Strike

The most significant aspect of the 1959 strike was the cooperation between Indian and Fijian workers against white employers (Bain, 1989: 17). 'The appearance of a coalition between Indian workers and Fijian workers combined as a more or less united proletariat against white domination and exploitation was very disturbing to the chiefs', claims Bain. More than to the chiefs, I would say that it was disturbing to the European vested interests who enlisted the help of the Fijian chiefs.

'The Fijian workers were weaned quickly from their new found alliance and the status quo ante was quickly restored' (Bain, 1989: 18). Bain's patronizing language suggests that he considers the Fijians as naïve and trusting and open to manipulation. The chiefs are credited with quelling the riots, but B. D. Lakshman, a leading trade unionist and Member of the Legislative Council, seemed to have played a more important role. Hince noted that the

official report, after praising Lakshman for his public action, 'widened such praise to include Fijian chiefs' (Hince, 1990: 20).

After the disturbances, the chiefs encouraged the formation of separate Fijian unions in all major industries so that Fijians would not be 'corrupted' or 'led astray' by 'Indian agitators' (Bain, 1989: 18). Bain claims that the chiefs did it to maintain their status quo.

The 1959 riots in Suva were seen by most as a 'racial' phenomenon with Fijian and Indian workers joining forces against the Europeans and attacking their properties. According to Heartfield, the report of the riots to the Fiji Legislative Council by Chief Justice A. G. Lowe 'established beyond doubt that the riots contained an anti-European motive' (Heartfield, 2002: 76).

Heartfield, however, questions the validity of this claim. Europeans suffered the most because of their greater wealth but Chinese and Indians also suffered losses. So it was not anti-European but 'anti-poverty'. The protest and strike were not 'racial' as far as the leaders of the strike were concerned 'but the means to advance a legitimate economic demand' (Heartfield, 2002: 77). Heartfield suggests that it was the *Fiji Times* editor, Len Usher, who 'first introduced a racial element into the reporting'.

Rather than appreciating the role of the Fijian chiefs as peace makers in calming the mob¹ and stopping the rioting, Bain is critical of the chiefs, claiming that they tried to divide the Fijian and Indian workers on 'racial' lines in order to maintain their status quo. It was the European vested interests who wanted to stop the Fijians and Indians coming together and challenging their status quo just as in the 1920s, they tried to stop the Fijians and Indians getting together by using Fijians against the Indians when the Indians went on strike.

In 1959, Fijian chiefs were called upon to calm the rioters. The chiefs had been moderators and against any violent change. As Ratu Sukuna was called to support the banishment of Nawai in 1917, the chiefs who addressed the unruly crowd at Albert Park in 1959, and to put an end to the rioting. Included in chiefs was the highest chief, Ratu George Cakobau, and other high chiefs like Ratu Edward Cakobau, Ratu Penaia Ganilau and Ratu Mara. 'Ratu Edward expressed his shame that the Fijians had been led on by "other people" who were using them for their own ends. The same theme was hammered home even more forcefully by Ratu Penaia Ganilau'

¹ This was a role they successfully played again in 1968 as Norton notes (1990: 102).

(Bain, 1989: 16).

Elsewhere, however, Bain writes appreciatively of Ratu Edward. 'His warm charm, innate dignity and gentle courtesy were to win hearts around the world ... and above all in his capacity to transcend race in his wide-ranging friends and admirers. He was a significant and successful breaker of racial divides in Fiji itself – always considerate, never condescending, and the teller of stories ... he was rarely without a willing audience, and it was invariably interracial. Not for nothing, had he been one of the founders of the Union Club in Suva where Fijians, Indians, Europeans and part-Europeans met and mixed in colonial days when it was the exception so to do' (Bain, 1989: 30). Bain describes Ratu Edward as a 'breaker of racial divides in Fiji' in one place and in another, mentions him as a chief who tried to stop the Indian and Fijian workers coming together against the vested interests.

If the workers of the two ethnic groups coming together meant rioting and destruction, then perhaps the chiefs were astute in believing it was better to have separate unions for Fijians. The chiefs also believed that the Fijians were being used by others for their own ends. The chiefs were for a gradual change, rather than a sudden one, which would ensure Fijian rights and protect their culture.

However, it proved impossible for the establishment to stop the workers from joining hands in a common cause. Anderson noted that the splinter ethnically based unions that arose were not successful in the long run and most had a fairly short life span, one of the main reasons for this being the small size of most of these unions (1977: 8). The only one to survive was the Fijian Teachers' Association.

Trade Unions and Political Parties

When party politics started in Fiji in the 1960s, the two major parties represented the workers (Federation Party later known as National Federation Party) and the capitalistic Alliance Party. The founder-leader of the NFP, A.D. Patel, was a capitalist but he was against exploitation so he fought hard to stop the exploitation of the farmers by European vested interests. Similarly, though Ratu Mara, the leader of the Alliance Party, led a political party supported by the capitalists, he, like Patel, was against exploitation. So when Patel succeeded in getting a better deal for the farmers through the Denning Award in 1969, Ratu Mara, as Chief Minister, was suppor-

tive of taking measures to stop the exploitation of farmers by the Australian monopoly, the CSR.

Patel died before Independence. The first elected Parliament in 1972 had trade union leaders on both sides. Sakeasi Waqani-valagi, who represented the Mineworkers' Union, was on the government side, and controversial union leader, Apisai Tora, was with the opposition NFP. Ratu Mara had said that his government wanted the workers to receive the maximum wage that the economy of the country could support (LC Debate, 2 April 1968: 66). Similarly, the NFP leaders helped not only the sugarcane farmers but also other workers. An Opposition Member of Parliament, K. C. Ramrakha, a lawyer, used to be the president of the Fiji Teachers' Union for several years until after Independence by when their salaries and conditions of work improved considerably. According to Deryck Scarr, the 'Alliance government could fairly be credited with having assumed responsibility since the mid-1970s for expanding employment and incomes by putting financial and technical support into developing natural resources' (1988: 27).

If the Alliance Party was becoming more pro-worker, the NFP was becoming less worker-oriented. Patel had identified the mineworkers as the next group to champion after the sugarcane farmers. But under its new leader, Siddiq Koya, the party no longer showed an interest in the mineworkers who were victims of exploitation. Slowly, it was beginning to concentrate only on issues of concern to the Indians and there were no Indian mineworkers. In 1977, when Jai Ram Reddy became its leader, the change of the NFP from a workers' party became complete as it became a party for the Indian capitalists.

From the mid-1960s, the union movement managed to develop without ethnic differences and remained so until the mid 1980s. This was remarkable in a country where such differences were significant. Anderson noted: 'The success of the union movement in avoiding such a split would seem to be due to a conscious effort to exclude racial differences in organization and among office holders. It is common for the top positions in a union to be held by persons of both Indian and Fijian "race". The fact that the union movement has avoided direct political involvement has also helped as political parties tend to divide on racial lines' (Anderson, 1977: 23-24).

An important step in the development of trade union solidarity in Fiji was the formation in 1951 of the Fiji Industrial Workers' Congress (FIWC). In 1967 it changed its name to the Fiji Trade Un-

ion Congress² (FTUC) and became affiliated to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). James Raman was the Secretary of the FTUC from 1972 to 1988, when he was replaced by Mahendra Chaudhry who had been the Assistant Secretary (Hince, 1996: 27-28). In 1973, a few unions broke away from the FTUC and organised another national body called the Fiji Council of Trade Unions (FCTU) (Fiji Ministry of Information, 1980: 68).

The growing strength of organised labour and recognition of trade unions by the Government made it imperative for employers to form their own organisation so that they could also have a united voice. In 1960, an association of employers, called the Fiji Employers' Consultative Association, was formed. The main aim of the Association was to protect the interests of its members and to provide consultative services to the members on industrial relation matters (Fiji Ministry of Information, 1980: 68-69).

In 1964, the Trade Disputes Ordinance was adopted. The main provision of the legislation was the inclusion of settlement of disputes in certain situations by reference to compulsory arbitration. A problem which began to cause a lot of friction was the one of recognition of unions by their employers. Since it was Government policy to promote collective bargaining, Government realised that recognition was an essential pre-requisite to its effectiveness. The Recognition Act came into being in late 1976. The main criteria entitling union recognition for the purpose of collective bargaining was that the union must have as its members more than 50 per cent of the persons eligible for membership. The Permanent Secretary for Labour was empowered under the Act to issue a compulsory recognition order after having been satisfied himself that the union has the requisite membership of more than 50 per cent of the eligible persons (Fiji Ministry of Information, 1980: 69).

Tripartism

A Tripartite Forum was formed in December 1976 to achieve a balanced approach in matters of national interest. The Forum was made up of representatives from the Fiji Trade Union Congress, Fiji Employers' Consultative Association and Government. The Forum

² It, however, had nothing to do with the B. D. Lakshman-led grouping of unions under the same name established in 1959.

sought to reach a common understanding when dealing with issues which affected the national interest such as industrial relations, job creation, and greater flow of investment and general economic and social development of the country. The Tripartite Forum had no statutory authority; the three parties involved had voluntarily come together and had agreed to abide by the Forum's decisions voluntarily.

From 1977, the Tripartite Forum played a key role in worker-employer interaction. One scholar had this to say about tripartism: 'I regard tripartism...as the philosophic cornerstone of sound, progressive and equitable industrial relationships' (Hince, 1996: 4). Another scholar, however, believed that in Fiji while this 'corporatist approach to labour management attempted to institutionalize union leaders toward "responsible" unionism and create industrial peace' it also 'effectively undermined the more militant Fiji Council of Trade Unions (FCTU)' by incorporating the FTUC (Naidu, 1987: 215). The fact remains that the FTUC was the original organisation while the FCTU was a breakaway one which was fairly new at the time the Tripartite Forum was established.

The Prime Minister chaired the Forum. The sub-committees which operated indicated the overall breadth of the tripartite consultations. It was further noted about the working of tripartism in Fiji: 'Whilst the processes of the Forum were consultative, government inevitably sought to honour agreements' (Hince, 1996: 52). Until 1984, the Tripartite Forum had a stabilising effect on the country's economy and the industrial relations scene because of its voluntary commitment to work out a balanced solution that was satisfactory to the parties concerned, and to Fiji as a whole.

The Achievements of the Union Movement

The period between 1970 and 1984 was one of positive achievements for the union movement, though it is said that an attempt was made to control union action through the Trade Dispute Act of 1973 which 'weakened trade unionism in Fiji' (Naidu, 1987: 215). It, however, strengthened the position of labour bureaucrats 'as spontaneity of action from the rank and file was all but legislated out of existence' (Naidu, 1987: 215).

By 1975, the strength of the Fiji Public Service Association, arising from its increased membership and financial security, enabled it to appoint a full time General Secretary, Mahendra

Chaudhry; by the late 1970s, both the government and the public were aware of 'the emerging power of the FPSA as a union' (Leckie, 1988: 149-50).

After independence, the workers of Fiji led by their unions enjoyed a remarkable degree of success in improving their wages/salaries and conditions of work by remaining politically neutral and ensuring multiracialism in the unions. The civil servants gained substantial salary increases and improvements in working conditions. The FPSA 'proved to be a remarkably successful union' and its success was attributed partly to the personality of Chaudhry who gave it a strong 'bargaining image' (Leckie, 1988: 167). It also acquired a 'reputation for submitting well researched papers' (Leckie, 1988: 167). It was, however, accused of opportunism. This accusation of opportunism stemmed mainly from its ability to display 'a range of attitudes and tactics' (Leckie, 1988: 167).

The improvement in salaries, however, led to 'the formation of a labour aristocracy' in the urban areas which became too demanding and ignored the plight of the rural and other blue collar workers (Plange, 1986: 21). The labour aristocracy largely ignored the farm labourers, plantation and other rural based workers (Hince, 1996: 6). Not only was the government salary bill already out of step with rural incomes, it seemed out of touch with reality when compared to what was being paid to the destitutes of the nation – a widow with two adult unemployable crippled children and no family and community support and no income at all received \$30 a month from the social welfare department's destitute allowance scheme (Scarr, 1988: 27).

'Nearly two thirds of all Fijian households were at risk of poverty', noted Robertson and Tamanisau (1988: 30). Yet the trade unions were demanding higher pay for their urban workers at the expense of rural dwellers, failing to pay heed to the warnings of the Reserve Bank that the national economy could not afford it. In 1984, according to the International Monetary Fund salaries in Fiji were 15 per cent too high for what the economy could sustain. Such a statement might be doubtful as IMF and the Reserve Bank always took a pro-business stance. All the same the urban workers seemed to have been getting more than the country could afford and the Government felt justified in imposing a wage freeze in 1984 after implementing the Nicol and Hurst report.

Nicol and Hurst Report and the Wage Freeze

The Nicol and Hurst job evaluation report, which was presented in 1982, met with protest from all sides including the FPSA which criticized it 'for seeking to widen the gap between those at the top and those at the bottom of the salary scale' (Howard, 1987: 116). When negotiations failed to reach any agreement after several months, it was decided to send it for arbitration. There was 'uncharacteristic solidarity' (Howard, 1987: 116) against the union with even the opposition NFP condemning the unions. NFP leader Jai Ram Reddy stated that 'it was a pity that while 1500 sugar workers and many other workers faced redundancy, civil servants were going to arbitration for implementation of a pay grading report' (quoted in Howard, 1987: 116).

In November 1984, the Finance Minister in his budget for 1985, proposed an immediate wage freeze. 'The union response was one of outrage... and that it made a "complete mockery" of the 1984 Tripartite Agreement' (Howard, 1987: 117). Kevin Hince noted that the government failed to consult the Tripartite Forum and unilaterally imposed the wage freeze (Hince, 1996: 52). It was, however, the government's position that another wage increase would have adversely affected the rural-based workers who were in the majority. The Economic Summit called to discuss the freeze in February 1985, was boycotted by both the NFP and the FTUC (Scarr, 1988: 28).

When the government imposed the wage freeze the unions hit back by politicizing the union movement. The wage freeze was the immediate reason for the formation of the Fiji Labour Party (FLP) and the fall of the Alliance government in 1987. It was a timely move to have a Labour Party as the opposition NFP had become almost defunct. The new party soon lost direction and went into a coalition with the NFP though the policies of the two parties were very different. The Labour Party which claimed to be for the downtrodden and talked of 'social justice' and a 'caring' government (Robie, 1989: 215) did not seem to care about the plight of the majority of the population which still lived in the rural areas because it was dominated by the labour aristocracy.

The Success at Nadi Airport and the Failure at Vatukoula Goldmine

A significant achievement of the union movement was in the aviation industry. At Nadi Airport, Qantas maintained aircraft and facilities. After several industrial actions by the airport workers, who had problems with Qantas, Air Terminal Services (ATS) with worker participation, was established in 1981 to take over from Qantas. The Prime Minister applauded the establishment of ATS. The initial plan was for a state-owned enterprise under the Air Pacific Company. 'With intensive negotiations and unfailing efforts by the union's leader, government finally agreed to remain only a majority shareholder with the union members owning the rest' (Plange, 1986: 21-2).

The ATS was a joint venture operation between the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji which held 51 per cent of the shares and the workers who hold 49 per cent. The company was formed to take over the catering and ground handling services at Nadi International Airport when QANTAS decided to withdraw from providing these services (Hince, 1996: 33).

What marred the achievements of the union movement in the period after Independence was the demise of unionism in the gold-mining industry at Vatukoula. Vatukoula was a specific example of the failure of unionism outside the main urban areas. This was the most noticeable failure in the union movement in the post Independence period.

The initial problem of the mineworkers union was in finding a sincere and dedicated leader. Sakeasi Waqanivalagi seemed to have been the first responsible leader they had. Waqanivalagi, who was elected to the Legislative Council in 1966 and became an Alliance parliamentarian in 1972, however, was not the usual trade union leader. Before his appointment, the mineworkers' union appeared to be in disarray with yet another of its secretaries charged with embezzlement. At the invitation of the mineworkers' union executive, the colonial administration intervened, suggesting Waqanivalagi as successor to the secretary but since he was not a mine-worker, he did not have first hand knowledge of their problems. Waqanivalagi became the mineworkers' union secretary in 1962. He was an outsider, who was 'unfamiliar with the harsh demands of [the mineworkers'] trade'. He had been taught 'the principles of "responsible" trade unionism at Oxford and Harvard' (Emberson-Bain,

1994: 185).³ When he became the Mineworkers Union secretary, he encouraged the Joint Consultative Council which was accepted as a forum for Emperor Gold Mines and the Fiji Mineworkers Union.

It is claimed that Waqanivalagi 'turned labour management relations at the goldmines into a model, even if temporarily, for the country' (Plange, 1986: 19). Ironically, the living standards for workers at the mine remained far below what was acceptable, as Emberson-Bain noted three decades later. More importantly, the mineworkers did not share the view that relations between labour and management at the goldmine was a model for the country, as is evident from their desire to get rid of Waqanivalagi.

When R.D. Patel called for nationalization of the gold mine in 1967, Waqanivalagi failed to support his call. Patel even criticized the perks and the luxurious lifestyle enjoyed by the expatriate officers at the mine (Legislative Council Debates, 1 Sept. 1967: 593). This should have been the signal for Waqanivalagi to expose the shocking living conditions of the mineworkers. The opportunity was not taken by Waqanivalagi to highlight the contrast in the facilities given to the indigenous mineworkers and their families and their expatriate bosses.

Waqanivalagi, as an Alliance Member of the Legislative Council was in a good position to highlight this sorry state of affairs at the goldmine and persuade the government, which was a partly elected government, to take remedial action. The opposition also would have been supportive of any such move as at that time it supported government policies which were in the interest of the nation. Waqanivalagi was short-sighted in thinking that the grants from the government given to the company would solve the problem of the mineworkers whom he represented by expanding employment opportunities.

He did not try to improve the living conditions of the workers; his only interest seemed to have been in getting more money from the government. It was when there was a request for more aid to the gold mining industry in 1967, that R.D. Patel first advocated nationalization of the goldmine (Legislative Council Debates, 1 Sept. 1967: 595). The NFP opposed further aid but no one spoke in support of R. D. Patel's call for nationalization at that time. Neither the

³ Labour department gave fellowships for selected union members to undertake courses in labour economics and labour studies abroad. Waqanivalagi had undertaken study abroad under such a fellowship.

government side which had a union official from Vatukoula, Sakiassi Waqanivalagi, nor the opposition to which R. D. Patel belonged spoke in favour of such a move though a year later the NFP advocated such a policy. One scholar has noted that 'nationalisation of the gold-mining industry' was in the NFP's manifesto for the August 1968 by-elections (Lal, 1992: 203).

A few months after the by-elections, the NFP, through R. D. Patel, introduced a motion in the Legislative Council calling for the nationalization of the goldmine (Leg. Co., 30 Jan 1969: 151-163). A European member on the government side, in opposing nationalization, claimed that it was against the very notion of a 'free' society and it would spell doom for further overseas investment (Emberson-Bain, 1994: 177). Emberson-Bain has claimed that nationalisation of the goldmine 'had crystallized into a central issue' in the party's 'electoral platform'. But A.D. Patel died in October 1969, before the next general elections which was in 1972 and Vatukoula did not feature in it at all. Siddiq Koya, who had become the NFP leader after Patel's death, himself, admitted that the only thing the party advocated in the 1972 general elections was free education.

In introducing the motion calling for the nationalization of the Vatukoula goldmine, R.D. Patel said he was doing it 'in the interest of national economy' and 'in the best interests of our country' (Leg Co., 30 Jan 1969: 152). He further said that nationalization of the goldmine was not 'for the benefit of any particular race, any particular party, or any particular group of people but for the whole state of Fiji' (Leg. Co. 30 Jan 1969: 153).

A. D. Patel might have wanted to make the goldmine a major policy platform. It would have been logical to do so, for by then the NFP was about to achieve the two major victories it had been fighting for – the end of colonialism and exploitation by the CSR Company. So Vatukoula would have given him a new issue to fight for and it would have also brought the party the Fijian support that Patel had been seeking to make it a multiracial party not only in name but in reality. But he did not live to see it happen. The new leader of the party, Siddiq Koya, did not seem to have any interest in the miners' welfare. Perhaps this was the earliest indication that the NFP under its new leader was fast changing from what it originally was to an ethnic opposition.

Dissatisfaction at Waqanivalagi's leadership as the Secretary of the miners' union culminated in the nomination of Apisai Tora, a member of the NFP, for the position. Tora, however, did not

become the secretary of the union as his nomination was invalidated in 1967 because the Trade Union Ordinance prohibited any person from holding office in more than one union (Emberson-Bain, 1994: 186). Navitalai Raqona, a young underground miner, was later elected as the secretary.

In 1978, for the first time, the miners pressed the case for nationalization. 'And for a while, the possibility of a government purchase of the mine was seriously entertained' (Emberson-Bain, 1994: 205). In January 1978, the Prime Minister visited Vatukoula and 'announced the Government's decision to enter into negotiations with Emperor with a view of acquiring Emperor's operations in Fiji' (Parliamentary Debates, 24 Feb 1978: 95).

The Prime Minister asked Attorney General, Vijay Singh, to begin work on behalf of the government. Vijay Singh asked the Minister for Labour, the Minister of State for Lands and Mineral Resources and the Minister of State for Forests to join him in discussions with Emperor. Help was also provided by Commonwealth Technical Fund while other experts provided reports. Vijay Singh told Parliament that the last report was expected from Canadian experts after which a decision was to be made. So there was a 'delay as compared to the hopes that had been expressed by the Prime Minister in early January when he visited Vatukoula', Singh said (Parliamentary Debates, 24 Feb 1978: 96). Ratu Mara later noted that 'negotiations ultimately broke down on price, when the gap between the sides was too great to be bridged' (Mara, 1997: 140).

'Losing the battle for nationalization was another mark of the union's failure', noted Emberson-Bain (1994: 205). It is also not clear if this failure had anything to do with the opposition in the Alliance party (by mainly its European members) to nationalization. In 1970, when the decision was made to nationalize the sugar industry, Ratu Mara had the Fijians solidly behind him in everything he did and the Indian community wanted the CSR to leave so he was not worried about the reaction of the European community to his actions.

By the mid-1970s, he no longer enjoyed solid national support so he had to be more sensitive to criticism from all quarters. Besides he no longer had the support even of the NFP to nationalising the gold industry though initially, before Independence, it was the NFP which had suggested such a move for the good of the country.

Another reason for the government's reluctance to nationalize the goldmine could have been the negative publicity that its union

officials generated. Navitalai Raqona, who succeeded Waqani-valagi as the Mineworkers Union secretary, was a contrast to the latter not only because the former was a mineworker and had first hand knowledge of the problems. He was also very militant as a trade unionist, but by his flippancy, he mainly succeeded in making the union a laughing stock and soon people stopped taking him seriously. Hince noted: 'In 1977, the excuse of a specific strike of mineworkers was utilized by the company to refuse to re-employ active unionists' (Hince, 1990: 5). Later it is claimed that 'Government colluded with the employer to remove Navitalai Raqona, secretary of the union during the period of militancy, from office and ultimately deregister the union' (Hince, 1996: 5).

In 1972, the sugar industry was nationalised, putting an end to the exploitation of farmers by the Australian CSR company. The sugar cane farmers were fortunate to have had dedicated leaders like Swami Rudrananda and A.D. Patel to highlight their plight and fight for their redress. Unfortunately, the mineworkers did not have such leaders to fight on their behalf.

Almost a decade after nationalising the sugar industry, in 1981, ATS was established to take over ground handling at Nadi Airport from Qantas. If the creation of FSC only resulted in getting expatriate exploiters replaced by local ones as has been suggested (see Gaunder, 2007: 128), ATS was a 'multidimensional' success story (Hince, 1996, p.33) which was made possible by its union leaders refusing to politicize the union and concentrating on important issues that affected the workers. Rather than following the example of ATS, the advisers of the workers at Vatukoula in the 1980s decided to make it part of party politics of the FLP. They also failed to learn from the example of A.D. Patel, who in 1969, agreed to Ratu Mara's suggestion of making sugar a bi-partisan (non-political) issue (LC Debates, 23 April 1969: 543) and succeeded in his efforts to get a better deal for the cane farmers. The supporters of the mineworkers would have had better success if they had merely highlighted the problems rather than trying to turn them into party politics.

The Fiji Labour Party was established with support from several activists at USP, which included local and expatriate academics. They failed to realise that in a developing country like Fiji, unlike in western countries, getting rid of a proven leader, without a suitable replacement with clear policies to take over, can mean anarchy (Gaunder, 2006: 25). The activities of the FLP soon led to a split in the union movement.

Conclusion

In colonial Fiji, though formal recognition was given to trade unionism by giving workers the freedom to form unions, there was no legal framework for the compulsory recognition of unions. This came only after Independence as both the major political parties at that time were sympathetic towards the workers. What the leaders of the two major parties abhorred most was the exploitation of the workers especially by the European vested interests. The NFP which started as a party of the 'have-nots', however, started changing after independence and started concentrating on mainly issues that affected the Indians. Later, it became a party of the Indian capitalists.

Meanwhile, the Alliance Party, which started as a party of the capitalists in the country became more pro-worker. This change in the Alliance Party contributed towards improvements in the lives of the workers in the 1970s. But this itself led to the formation of a 'labour aristocracy' in the urban areas. The 'labour aristocracy' politicised the union movement in the 1980s. Besides, with the NFP no longer championing issues that affected the workers and having any concrete policies which were different from that of the Alliance, the need for a strong opposition to scrutinize the actions of the government and to make the Westminster system work effectively became imperative. The expectation seemed to have been that the Labour Party that would emerge would become a 'thoughtful'⁴ and effective opposition, as the NFP had initially been, before it was ready to rule the country.

Unfortunately, the Fiji Labour Party did not become the opposition, 'thoughtful' or otherwise, while it became reduced to a predominantly ethnic Indian party by forming a coalition with the almost exclusively Indian NFP. This resulted in many of the ethnic Fijians who had supported the formation of the FLP withdrawing their support for the new party. So the major gains that the union movement had made in the 1960s and 1970s, such as developing without racial barriers and improving the working and living conditions of the majority of the people in the country, were all lost in 1987 following the military coup that overthrew the democratically elected labour led coalition government.

⁴ Goldsmith (1993) defines a 'thoughtful' opposition as 'characterised by consensus around the good and criticism of the bad; it justifies support where that is necessary or desirable, opposition where it is not'.

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