

**A Fair Australia**  
**Environment and Sustainable Development**  
**Policy**  
***ACTU CONGRESS 2003***

## INTRODUCTION

1. Trade unions across the globe acknowledge the unique role we play in sustainable development.
2. In the ten years following the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 through to the recent World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in September 2002, trade unions have researched, debated and defined our contributions and perspectives on sustainable development.
3. At the WSSD, global unions represented by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD and the Global Union Federations summarised union experiences since Rio.
4. The result was an understanding that sustainable patterns of production and consumption can only be achieved through an approach that integrates social, environmental and economic measures, not as separate 'pillars', but as inseparable aspects of a single world.
5. What distinguishes the trade union position on sustainable development most clearly from that of other groups is the focus on the social dimension, and particularly on jobs growth in quality employment as the key to poverty eradication and acceptable living standards. A central requirement for unions is, at a minimum, respect for and adherence to ILO Core Labour Standards.
6. Sustainable development is a workplace issue as well as an issue for the broader community. A strong union voice arguing for sustainable development is a voice for a fairer and just society.
7. Apart from informing community debate and policy, trade unions can educate members and employers about sustainable development. Trade unions can also promote sustainable patterns of personal and domestic consumption. In as much as Australian workplaces are large

consumers of the world's resources, so too are Australian workers in their personal lives.

8. Corporate Australia is leveraging sustainability and triple bottom line reporting for commercial gain. However, definitions of sustainability and triple bottom line reporting are fluid. Trade unions must educate and activate members to fully participate in the formulation and implementation of sustainability benchmarks in their workplaces with a view to ensuring better occupational health and safety as well as improving the quality of employment.
9. Trade unions play an important role in educating and activating workers to change their personal purchasing and consumption habits as well as improving production processes.
10. ACTU Congress adopts the following strategies as the basis of an action plan for the next three years.

## EDUCATION AND PROMOTION

11. Education for sustainable development enables people to build the knowledge, values and skills to take part in decisions about the way we act, locally and globally, to improve the quality of life now, without damaging the planet for the future. Integrating sustainability issues into union education and training will ensure unions and members act sustainably now and into the future.
12. The challenge is to raise awareness and understanding of the key elements of sustainable development from a trade union standpoint, namely:
  - (a) sustainable employment and adherence by employers to ILO Core Labour Standards;
  - (b) responsible global citizenship;
  - (c) improved living and working conditions;
  - (d) social inclusion, cohesion and justice;
  - (e) respect for diversity; and
  - (f) concern for and stewardship of our environment.
13. A formal engagement point might be integrating the social, economic and ecological principles of sustainability into general delegates' organising and occupational health and safety training. This would sit alongside more general membership awareness programs.

14. Education programs should encourage union members to implement sustainable living techniques in their personal and domestic environment as well as in their workplaces.
15. Trade unions can provide the tools and information to assist members to be more responsible consumers of products and services in particular water, energy and other natural resources, and to be aware of consumer labels.
16. Trade Unions have the capacity to deliver clear messages to the public about the key elements of sustainable development. Trade unions can raise awareness in the wider community by providing leadership on issues of sustainability. The union movement shares common values about a sustainable future with the wider Australian community and we have the opportunity to drive this debate.

## **JOBS GROWTH IN SUSTAINABLE INDUSTRIES**

### **Green Buildings**

17. Commercial buildings are the fastest growing source of greenhouse gas emissions in Australia, exceeding even the growth in transport emissions. Since 1990 emissions from this sector has increased by about 50% and in total account for about 17% of stationary energy emissions.
18. The objective of "green buildings" is to reuse and recycle as much material as possible in the creation of the building but also to design the building in such a way that it uses light, heat and shade to the maximum effect hence minimising the use of non-renewable resources. Such buildings must be resource efficient in energy and material use.
19. Green buildings must have, at their core, an absolute commitment to minimise the impact of the building and its waste on the environment and the workers who build and work in them.
20. Green buildings are economically sustainable. The 60L building (housing the ACF in Carlton) has reduced water usage by 90% and energy usage by two thirds. At the same time the building costs were on a par (or less) than conventional buildings. Green building also takes pressure off the supply side of the energy equation.
21. It is possible therefore to build green buildings without additional costs to consumers and without having to sacrifice style and comfort and while maintaining employment in the industry.
22. The ACTU will work with the construction unions to facilitate a union voice in the development of new industry standards as well as standards for training of workers in the industries.

## Renewable Energy

23. Wind power, solar power, tidal power and new hydro power are all examples of renewable energy sources that can assist in reducing emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants. Australia is heavily reliant on coal and other fossil fuels in its energy industries, and bases a significant part of its trade on low cost energy. In a world moving to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, it makes sense for these industries to diversify their energy technologies through the deployment of renewable energies.
24. Renewable energy sources are generally more labour intensive so have the potential to generate additional jobs. Investing in renewable energy without damaging existing industry is possible with the capability to support growth in high quality jobs.
25. Measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions are often portrayed as costing jobs and as a hindrance to economic growth. Such problems can be minimised and avoided through stimulation of new energy technologies and energy efficiency.
26. The reality is we need to invest both in existing industry to increase efficiency and in new industry supplies just to meet increasing demand. The ACTU will work with the unions involved in the energy sector to secure sustainable employment and reductions in greenhouse emissions.

## Transport

27. There are two issues relevant to job creation in the area of transport - the direct job creation generated by building roads and rail lines, and the indirect job creation generated through the stimulation of economic activity resulting from infrastructure development.
28. Any integrated approach to transport (ie, a mixture of public and private transport modes) must properly consider the effects on both job creation and the environment. Any transport plan must encompass increased public transport infrastructure.
29. Public transportation systems must become an integral part of urban planning. In addition, subsidies which are used to prop up inefficient and unsustainable energy production and transportation must be reformed to remove the regressive social impacts. Union and community partnerships are important both to develop and advocate for future policy initiatives that meet 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges.

## Water, Land and Rivers

30. This year, 2003, is the international year of freshwater. Australia is the driest continent. We need to vastly improve our conservation, use, and the quality of our water. Water and water assets must remain in public ownership. We need to develop national and state water conservation programs, including the large scale re-use of treated effluent for use in agriculture, business and urban parklands.
31. Rural landscapes in Australia face a crisis. Landcare, salinity and the general health of our rivers are major environment issues but equally social and environmental challenges.
32. We have over-allocated water resources to the point where over a quarter of our river systems along with local streams, lakes and water catchments, mainly in southern and eastern Australia, are exploited beyond sustainable extraction limits. With declining water quality, increasing sediment loads, declining riverside vegetation, disappearing wetlands, and rising salinity levels, we have a national crisis in river health.
33. Over seventeen million hectares of land - an area more than twice the size of Tasmania - is at high risk of dryland salinity over the next 50 years.
34. Land clearing continues at over 500,000 hectares per year - the highest rate in the developed world.
35. We can repair our precious lands and rivers if we make a concerted national effort now.
36. Improving agricultural practices is also part of the solution and unions involved in this sector should have a voice in the development of sustainable agriculture, including the phase-out of unsafe and unsustainable agricultural practices.
37. Opportunities for earth repair industries can generate jobs in regional and rural Australia and should form part of the agenda for developing and supporting union cities and towns.

## GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITIES FOR ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

38. Just as unions recognise and work at an international level to reduce the massive global inequities in working conditions and occupational health and safety, so unions recognise that environmental protection and sustainability follow the same paths of inequity. Those people of the world who work in the worst and most dangerous conditions for the lowest pay, invariably work and live in the most polluted and degraded environments.

39. The ACTU will work with international bodies such as the ILO and UNEP to promote improved living and working conditions and sustainable development. This could include a world-wide program of 'workplace assessments': a process whereby trade unions and employers in one or several work-sites, sectors or regions agree to joint assessments of workplace performance with agreed checklists of environmental, occupational and social criteria.
40. The ACTU will work with the international union movement through bodies such as the Global Unions\*, the OHSE program and the Blue/Green Working Group to develop initiatives such as Just Transition, which advocates a tax on pollution to fund financial support, health care and re-training for workers who may be displaced from environmentally bad workplaces.
41. The ACTU will support the ratification and implementation of international environmental treaties, including the Kyoto protocol.
42. The ACTU will advocate for appropriate government and academic research to identify industry winners and losers. With relevant unions and community groups we will lobby for the introduction of measures to protect against unfair competition from environmentally unsustainable, lower cost foreign production. Our ambition is to ensure that Australian environmental regulation results in a net conservation gain globally, rather than merely shifting production to countries not subject to the same environmental standards.

## SPECIFIC STEPS

43. The ACTU will facilitate the establishment of a union task force, with appropriate industry working parties. In the first instance, the areas of energy; water, land and rivers; green buildings; education and training and global responsibilities will make up union action plans. Action plans would identify key issues and areas for research and development and opportunities for unions to progress sustainable employment and practices, including just transition programs.
44. Social partnerships and relationships with community groups, business and the research community will be developed.
45. Specifically, common values and goals and joint priority areas will be identified with the ACF. This may include the identification of specific joint projects that may be undertaken as a tangible reflection of the ACTU priorities and commitments.

---

\* Global Unions are comprised of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), [inernetpo@icftu.org](mailto:inernetpo@icftu.org), the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC), [tuac@tuac.org](mailto:tuac@tuac.org), and the Global Union Federations (GUF), [www.global-unions.org](http://www.global-unions.org)