

Comments by Jeff Lawrence to the ACTU Congress 2009 in response to speech by Julia Gillard, 3 June 2009

[recording begins several seconds into response]

“I can assure you we are absolutely determined to use it to protect workers’ rights, and to spread collective bargaining and to grow unions.

“And I know and I appreciate that you’re determined on your side to ensure that the processes that have been set in train will be completed. Passing the transitional legislation, discussion about independent contractors, all the other issues that we’ve identified as needing further discussion and further work.

“And you’ve asked the question of us this morning, what will we do in response to the global financial crisis and in response to the Fair Work Act? I’ll answer that question briefly.

“We do have a strategy to implement the act, a strategy to use it to bargain and to grow and to protect workers’ rights. We have a strategy to ensure that implementation is done in a way that will get maximum benefit from the Act. And I’m sure the government will support us. We have the presentation to the Congress this afternoon of a growth and campaign plan which is an agenda for union change, growth and campaigning to ensure that we are projecting ourselves into the general community.

“We have a range of not just policies but action plans to respond to the global financial crisis. So, we will do our part in response to your question, we’ll do our part to deal with all those issues. But we do expect the Labor Government to play its part as well.

“That’s what partnership is all about, I think. It’s about each partner in the labour movement playing its role.

“We do expect the Labor government to have an ongoing agenda for IR reform that promotes workers’ rights. Because that’s what Labor Governments do.

“We do expect the Federal Labor Government and all state Labor governments to ensure that workers’ health and safety won’t be diminished. That’s what Labor governments do.

“And we do expect that all workers will have equal rights and the coercive powers that are part of the ABCC and all its apparatus will be abolished.

“I have here a petition which has been signed by the delegates of the congress and other worker representatives here in Brisbane. It calls on you as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Industrial Relations to convey our very real concerns about the ABCC and the discriminatory laws faced by Australian construction workers to the Prime Minister and the rest of the government. The petition notes that the ABCC has the power to compel

people to attend interviews, to force interviewees to answer questions and imposing prison sentences on workers who refuse.

“In its four years of operation the ABCC has failed to adequately deal with employers who break the law, rip off their workers or cut corners on safety.

“We’ve seen earlier today that the current number of workplace deaths and injuries in the construction industry is a national disgrace. And it’s actually got worse in the period of the ABCC. So construction workers deserve the rights of every other worker in this country, and that’s all we ask for.

“We call on the federal government to ensure that there’s one set of laws that apply to all Australian workers, to repeal the BCII act, abolish the ABCC and make sure that the new organisation of Fair Work Australia has no similar coercive powers. And to seriously address safety in workplaces to ensure that no workers are worse off under the harmonisation of occupational health and safety laws.

“I do thank you for coming. I do value that in all the period that Labor has been in government, as Sharan has said, for us, Julia has been the face of the government in many ways. We’ve had full and frank exchanges, we’ll continue to have those. The ACTU and unions have been forthright in arguing for their agenda and we’ll continue to do that.

“I’ve known Julia a long time and I don’t think she’s afraid of a good argument. And I don’t think she’s afraid of a forthright exchange of views and that in the end is what the Labor Government is about.

“I thank her for attending. I invite her to meet the families of the workplace accident victims who were good enough to be in attendance for Congress and I ask delegates to express appreciation for the comments that have been made by the government and appreciation of our determination to pursue our agenda as Australian unions.”