

Michele O'Neil, President ACTU

ACTU Congress 2018

President's Address

17th July, 2018

I want to begin by acknowledging the Traditional owners of the land we meet on today the Yuggera and Turrbal people and pay my respect to their elders past and present.

I would also like to acknowledge the First Nations delegates from all over the land in the room.

I want to also acknowledge

Ged Kearney

Bill Kelty, Greg Combet, Sharon Burrows and Jenny George

Sally McManus

TCF/CFMEU members in the room

I want to begin by thanking every one of you, your unions and your Members.

Today you have elected me to be your President which is both an amazing honour and a serious responsibility.

I don't take this role lightly.

I know I'm standing on the shoulders of great leaders of our movement that have come before me.

I feel humbled by your trust in me and want you to know how seriously I will honour that trust.

I will always be proud of my union but be assured that I understand that as of today my job is to represent every union and to fight for the rights of every member of our great movement.

You have made me feel both small to stand here before you all and receive this great honour and tall to take on the challenge ahead.

1. Who I am

I'm the youngest child of family of 5 feminist daughters. My Mum left school at 13 she was a factory worker a waitress and casual worker.

My Dad was a life long public sector worker and briefly a football administrator. My family taught me to stand up against injustice and to believe in the struggle for a fairer world.

I joined a union the same day I started my first job as a 14 year old waitress, it was the Union we know today as Uniting Voice. I worked in restaurants and bars and clubs and became active in anti apartheid , land rights and low cost housing campaigns.

I first really understood the importance and power of unionism when as a 14 year old girl my fellow union members helped me stand up against the supervisor who was sexually harassing me. I learnt early that as a union member you are never alone. That unionism at its core is about workers sticking together, a simple lesson in collective power.

I worked in the community sector with homeless young people and joined the ASU.

I have worked sewing labels into the back of jumpers and running a bank of knitting machines in a textile mill and became a member of the TCFUA.

I spent 28 year at the TCFUA as an organiser, campaigner, negotiator and State and National Secretary and had the opportunity to represent us in in Asia Pacific and Global Union federations.

I've been part of forming the FairWear campaign and Ethical Clothing Australia.

Together with my union I have fought for the rights of women, people who are low paid , migrants and refugees.

This year I have led my union into an amalgamation with the mighty MUA and the formidable CFMEU and been proud to be part of creating a great new fighting force for workers in this country. It was a hard decision to leave.

2. What I've learnt

Everything I know I learnt from the collective struggles of our unions.

No better education than the one I've received being part of our disputes and campaigns, our defeats and our great victories.

The Australian trade union movement is a master class in learning how to stand up and win.

If anyone can Change The Rules -We can

TCFUA members taught me so much.

So often characterized as victims and unskilled, you could not wish for a smarter, more militant, politically sophisticated ,strategic and courageous group of members.

Together we learnt that power is increased when others stand with you, that solidarity can be found in other unions lending their muscle to our protests and picket lines , in migrant communities, faith groups and student activists fighting with us in campaigns for outworker rights and the power in presenting our members voice and stories to the public and the Parliament.

That capitals global supply chains and the power of multi nationals required us to have a local, national and global response.

We understood that the only answer to organised corporate greed is organised labour.

Let me give you a current example. As you probably know I keep an eye on fashion in more ways than one.

I want to tell you about 2 of the worlds richest men.

Amnancio Ortega is the owner of Inditex the worlds largest fashion brand. You are more likely to know them as Zara.

He has a personal wealth of 74 billion US dollars (that's right personal not his business wealth).

Bernard Arnault is the owner of Louis Vuitton. Louis Vuitton owns many brands globally including our own RM Williams. He has a personal wealth of 73 billion US dollars.

The workers who make their products in Bangladesh are paid 70 US\$ per month.

The workers who make their products in Ethiopia are paid 35 US\$ per month.

The Australian workers who sell you clothes at Zara receive just \$20.79 Per hour

The Australian workers who make RMWilliams boots receive \$21.07
Per hour.

The exposure of this type of extreme and obscene inequality is
creating a mobilising moment here in Australia and around the world.
Because this is not fair or just.

Corporations and their owners cannot be allowed to continue to
distance themselves from responsibility for the people who make the
product or provide the service, that they make their profits from.

3. What needs to be Done

Insecure work , outsourcing, sham contracting , casual and labour hire
- these are not new for the people I have been representing.

The TCF Industry was capitals great laboratory to test this neo liberal
model. The literal cutting edge of globalisation.

We now see that model in every industry, with contract teachers and nurses whose skills and experience is being progressively undermined, out sourced public services, slave like conditions for agricultural and sex workers and rampant wage theft in hospitality and retail.

This shift must be fought with new campaigns and new strategies. In the TCF industry we changed the rules to win supply chain transparency, obligations for those brands at the top for the conditions of workers at the bottom, rights for the union to enter workplaces without notice.

We need to now win these rights and more for all workers.

To fight Inequality, Corporate greed, Privatisation, the decimating of our public and community services and to win real improvements in wages and living standards we must aim high.

Our plan is big and structural and will not be easily won.

We need to win:

The Right to bargain about what we want, with whoever we want.

To have at the bargaining table those with the economic power, to negotiate in a supply chain, sector or industry where there is economic leverage.

This is not just in the interest of workers.

Reputable employers are sick of being undercut by the unscrupulous ones.

Some Corporations, organisations and Government agencies understand that we need to regain the capacity to discuss and negotiate change that looks to the future.

That the union movement has a critical role to play in addressing the future of Work, technological change, digitisation, the gig economy, skills, training and societal change.

We understand that as workers our dignity is so often tied to our job, how we are treated, how secure we are.

Effective smart industry, trade and procurement policies which deliver sustainable secure jobs we can count on, are critical to improving pay, conditions and collective power.

Our current rules and laws effectively stop workers taking a united stand.

Our basic human right to withdraw our labour is highly regulated and restricted.

We drown in obstructionist rules and processes, choke in red tape and have the effect of our industrial action weakened by the limitations and bureaucracy around it.

When all else fails we simply need the right to strike.

We need a fair system.

We need to get rid of politically tainted industrial “regulators” like the ROC and ABCC and reestablish a independent fair non biased industrial tribunal with powers of arbitration.

How warped is our current system.

Imagine if we had a ROC or a different ABCC standing for the Australian Bankers and Corporate greed Commission.

That wherever bankers were loitering in whisky bars or hanging out in cafes in Lycra clad gangs they were filmed and taped and every obscenity they uttered about the poor was used against them when dragged before the courts.

If it was against the law for them to go into each other's offices without a written permit declaring them a fit and proper person and even then having to give 24 hours notice.

4.How we are going to do it

Our movement is of too few , our capacity to win change and then win it again every day in every workplace in the country is diminished by our lack of density.

15% is not enough.

There is no point in winning new rights and in changing the rules for only a few.

We know that a law is never enough, it's the lived reality of what happens in workplaces that breathe life into rights.

We know that we have endemic wage theft, non payment of Super, that women are paid 15.3% less than men.

We know that at the same time as record economic growth wages have stagnated.

We know that our minimum wage is nothing like a living wage.

We know that workers job insecurity and fear of job loss provides a platform for unscrupulous bosses to exploit.

And to change all of that we need to be in the corner of the low paid.

We want workers to know we are in their corner, that there is power in coming together/the collective.

5. I know we will win

Because working class people want a better future. We wont stand by and be the first generation to leave the next generation worse off.

I know we will win

Because extreme wealth and inequality is obscene.

The rise in the wealth and power of a few while those at the bottom are finding it harder every single day to make ends meet is wrong.

The delivery of billions of \$ in tax cuts to both the wealthy and big business at the same time as cuts to our schools and health system is unacceptable.

I know we will win

Because every great victory for workers has been borne of collective struggle.

Out of Courage and boldness.



The 8 hour day

Sick leave

Annual leave

Superannuation

Medicare

Health and safety laws

I know we will win

Because the comrades who came before us built the Australian trade union movement from nothing in far tougher circumstances, with even less rights and far less resources.

There is nothing inevitable about decline.

If you don't believe we can grow you are in the wrong room.

We are ready for this challenge and comrades I am ready for this new challenge.

My heart belongs to the TCFUA and I will always be a proud member of the CFMEU.

I will fight against the demonising and persecution of strong unions and unionists and governments efforts to criminalise what we do everyday.

I want to again thank you for this honour of being your new President and the opportunity you are giving me to take on a new role with you in our struggle.

I will never forget who pays my wages, that it's ordinary hard working union Members who put some of their hard earned pay towards belonging and paying their way in our great movement.

My history tells you that I will bring to the ACTU a thirst for justice

A belief in the power of solidarity ,

In the importance of building connections, alliances and finding new allies in working class ethnic communities, in our neighbourhoods and country towns and in our global movement.

Workers, our members, our families , our communities want change and are ready to fight for it.



To fight for

A more equal society,

Quality education,

High standards of health, child and aged care

A sustainable environment

Quality secure jobs

A living wage and fair conditions

Dignity and respect for all regardless of gender, race, sexuality, ability

This is our moment

I urge you to bring every bit of fight and passion you have in you to the struggle ahead

It will be tough but it will be worth it.

We will change the Government

We will change the rules

We will grow our movement

Remember There is no power greater anywhere beneath the sun.

Thank you

