

Speech by ACTU President Ged Kearney to 'White Cane Chain' rally
Melbourne, 15 September 2013

I am proud to stand before you today and express the solidarity of the ACTU with the struggle of Vision Australia Enterprises workers to save their jobs.

One of the fundamentals of a fulfilling and enriched life is a job.

A job is much more than a pay packet at the end of each week or fortnight.

Work gives us meaning, it defines us, it enables social interaction, and allows us to contribute to our community.

There are many reasons to be outraged about the planned closure of Vision Australia Enterprises, but none more so than it strips 73 employees of their basic dignity of a job.

By any standards, the wages paid by Vision Australia Enterprises are low. \$7.50 an hour or \$20,000 a year, subsidised by the government.

But that is not the real value of these jobs.

Perhaps it is best expressed in the words of one of these workers themselves.

Alan Berginac was blinded by a car accident almost 40 years ago. Before that he drove trucks.

But Alan has rebuilt his life through his employment at Vision Australia Enterprises.

This is what he has to say:

“The factory where I work now, Vision Australia Enterprises, is all I have left. The people, the work, that’s all I have. If the factory is closed, I will have nothing. I have a mortgage, but I won’t be able to afford it. The people who run this place, they don’t understand our lives, the things we are going through.”

Surely, part of the role of Vision Australia must be to provide meaningful employment for sight-impaired people.

If that means subsidising a facility that struggles to make a profit, then so be it.

Otherwise, what is the purpose of Vision Australia?

But as a union leader, I am sorry to say that what is occurring at Vision Australia is all too commonplace.

It is about putting profits before people.

Sadly, this mentality that places dollar signs above people’s lives has now seeped from the corporate world to the so called charitable world.

I am stunned, to say the least, to be told that the CEO of Vision Australia earns \$400,000 a year!

This is an organisation that receives more than \$30 million of donations every year from well-meaning donors, that receives special tax treatment because of its charitable status, that had revenues of \$84 million last financial year and net assets of \$178 million.

There have been all sorts of weasel words about this decision from the CEO of Vision Australia, about how it has been a “tough decision”.

But let’s call it for what it is: this is throwing onto the street 73 people, the majority of whom will be unable to find other work.

This, in an environment, where the unemployment rate is rising towards 6%.

It is Vision Australia that is blind - blind to its own community's needs and that is shameful.

So the staff of Vision Australia Enterprises and the Blind Workers Union of Victoria, I say this: the union movement has got your back.

Do not back down. Keep up the fight and there is the hope that you can win this and convince Vision Australia to reverse its decision.

But we can only do this by sticking together.

Solidarity.

*** ENDS ***