

**Address by ACTU President Ged Kearney**  
**Australian Unions Organising Conference, Melbourne**  
**26 February 2014**

**\*\*\* CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY\*\*\***

I wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we meet on today and pay respects to their elders past and present.

Good morning everyone.

How heart-warming it is to be among you all today, the pulse of our great Australian union movement.

Every day I feel privileged to be in this position, representing a movement of about 2 million hard-working people and their families as the voice of Australian workers.

A movement which is dedicated to spending every waking hour working for a better life for all Australians, not just a privileged few.

Dedicated to equality and justice.

Dedicated to better working conditions, safer workplaces and giving workers a say.

And dedicated to ensuring that Australian unions are modern and dynamic, and relevant to the everyday concerns of working Australians and their families.

I have always believed in the power of the collective, the solidarity of a union, as the greatest force for change not only in workplaces but in society.

Alone, we can feel powerless, but together and united – and organised - we can achieve great things.

For what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one – for the union makes us strong.

And we have achieved great things, as our history proves.

We do not have the bottomless financial resources of big business, but we have something more powerful - the strength of a movement of two million people.

That's more than the number of ticket-holding members of all the clubs in the AFL and the NRL combined.

Sixty per cent of Australians on collective agreements or Awards rely on unions to negotiate and protect their wages, conditions and rights at work, and deliver their annual pay rise.

A million and a half depend on unions every year to go into bat for them in the wage review by the Fair Work Commission.

\* \* \*

But let's face it, we are not meeting in the happiest of circumstances.

Dave has just outlined the enormous challenge we face.

I'm not going to dwell on the royal commission.

We all know it's a purely political monster.

We all know what its intent is: to demonise unions and union members and weaken our movement.

But we've been through this before.

Three times in fact: each time there has been a Liberal Government since the Whitlam era, at one stage or another they have established a royal commission into unions.

The fact that Abbott is doing it so early into his government merely tells us how desperate he is to get us out of the way.

I need you to be aware and armed with the facts – to be prepared to be political and tell your members when they ask – because they will – what it is.

Educate them!

But enough about the royal commission.

I have spent much time since the year began travelling the length and breadth of Australia, talking to workers all over the country – blue-collar and white-collar, public and private sector – and I can tell you there is already a growing sense of unease with the direction the Abbott Government is taking Australia.

Workers I met fear that the values that make up modern Australia – fairness, decency, equality – are at risk from a free market ideology that has been embraced by the government.

This goes well beyond, in Joe Hockey's words, "the end of the age of entitlement", or in Tony Abbott's words "an end to the handout mentality".

It goes to the very heart of the type of society we have.

Modern Australia has been built on a social compact where everyone has basic rights and equal opportunity, where we provide social protections to look after those who for one reason or another would otherwise be left behind, we reward hard work, and we ensure that wealth is spread evenly.

This spirit of a fair go that is imbued in our national character underpins the minimum wage and job security, the welfare system, public health and education, and a range of public services.

That these are essential parts of a civilised and productive society.

Not entitlements, not handouts, not charity.

They are rights, that we have fought for and must protect.

But in a short time since the election of the Abbott Government, the foundations of our society have been shaken.

Tony Abbott is in denial about the important role of government in moderating the inequities and excesses of the free market.

Contrary to all credible evidence, he recently told the World Economic Forum in Switzerland that the Global Financial Crisis “was not a crisis of markets but of one of governance”.

“Markets are the proven answer to the problem of scarcity,” he said.

He seems to have forgotten what caused the GFC.

Consistent with this ideology, the Abbott Government has vacated a position of national leadership and instead handed Australia over to big business to set its own agenda.

Their approach is the polar opposite of that taken by successive generations of Australian political leaders.

Rather than asking what is required to deliver the type of society we aspire to, they start from a position of how can we minimise the size of government and what can be provided from what is left over.

The grip of the free market ideology over the past few decades has already shifted the burden of risk onto individuals and households.

Anyone who calls Australia home and plans to live, work and retire here; anyone who wants to use the hospitals, send their children to the schools, and who cares about the direction our nation is heading can't afford to ignore the reality that our government is now seeking to push the envelope even further.

\* \* \*

So what's at stake from this new approach?

It is likely that the secretive Commission of Audit will be recommending policies that promote privatisation and small government.

Shifting services away from government (under the banner of “cost savings”) will bring big changes in the way Australia is run.

This new agenda is likely to see the end of free healthcare in Australia, with a proposal being floated to end bulk-billing by charging a \$6 co-payment for every visit to a GP.

The sale of Medibank Private is already in train, and privatisation of the other few remaining government enterprises are also likely.

We are likely to see a recommendation to broaden the scope and raise the amount of the Goods and Services Tax, including extending it to food.

Additionally, the Minister for Community Services, Kevin Andrews, has commissioned yet another review, this time into the social welfare system.

Those who will be most affected by cuts to welfare will be those who most rely on them; the poor, the elderly, and the disabled.

The impact on regional Australia will be particularly profound by creating an employment and services vacuum, which can only lead to the decline of communities.

Combined with other austerity measures already introduced by the Abbott Government, and the push by business to cut wages and employment conditions, further eroding secure jobs, these changes the potential to cause untold damage to our economy.

\* \* \*

In addition to these seismic changes to the role of government, you have the looming jobs crisis, and the joint Government-employer agenda to attack the take home pay, including penalty rates of Australian workers.

These things make me angry, and I'm sure they make you angry as well.

But it is fair to say that the majority of Australians are not as engaged with these issues, at this stage of the electoral cycle, as we are.

They are not really paying attention, and these things are not on their radar.

It is our role as unions to begin joining the dots and raising public awareness of what the Government's agenda is, and what the impact will be on the Australian way of life.

We must articulate an alternate agenda, a vision for the role of government and society for the 21st century that remains true to the Australian values of fairness and equality.

Our campaigns will stand up for society, for good services and decent welfare.

We want all Australians to live in a country that has a strong economy that works for everyone, not just big business, a country where you can have a secure job and make a decent living, where there are safety nets to protect you when you are vulnerable or need a helping hand, and where your rights are respected, at work, in the community, and even in the whirlpool of politics.

An economy that delivers dignity.

We know there is dignity in work.

Dignity in earning a living wage.

Dignity in being safe at work.

Dignity in having a say in how and when we work.

Dignity in having skills recognised.

We will oppose outsourcing and privatisation where it drives down wages and quality, expose the effects of cuts to services, benefits and working people, and defend the protections that are in place.

We will not allow the unemployed, the sick and other recipients of welfare benefits to be demonised as "bludgers".

And most of all, we believe that all Australians have a right to a secure and decent job.

As unions, we need to turn up the volume.

We cannot rely on politicians.

We need to begin changing the agenda in this country and changing the conversation.

Unions have to do it by building power in the economy and building support in both our memberships and our communities.

We must challenge the big business, free market narrative, and show the way for other Australians who feel the same way.

But we must also be patient.

It will take time for the anger of ordinary Australians to build – but build it will.

And when it does, we must show them there is hope and that we have a plan.

Our campaign strategy for the alternate vision is already underway, and you will hear much about it over the next three days.

\* \* \*

And this is where you come into the picture.

Because the ACTU officers and the ACTU Executive can plan the greatest strategy the world has ever seen, but it will all stand and fall in our workplaces.

The way ahead will be sophisticated, using the most modern and innovative techniques.

But the role of person-to-person conversations in workplaces and communities will remain crucial.

It will help us to identify workplaces, activists and communities.

It will help us strengthen our connections with each other, our members, our activists and the broader community.

And to organise so that we can turn those activists into members, and members into activists.

I will be accused of being ideological.

Let me offer you one of the great ideologies of the twentieth century.

It comes from Margaret Thatcher who said there is no society, only individuals.

And another, this time from Ben Chifley, and I have this on the wall in my office.

He said:

"I try to think of the labour movement, not as putting an extra sixpence into somebody's pocket or making somebody Prime Minister or Premier, but as a movement bringing something better to the people, better standards of living, greater happiness to the mass of the people.

“We have a great objective: the light on the hill, which we aim to reach by working for the betterment of mankind, not only here, but anywhere we may give a helping hand.

“If it were not for that, the labour movement would not be worth fighting for.”

I know whose side I’m on.

That is why this conference is so important.

This is the new beginning.

And comrades – it begins with you.

Thank you.