

**Address by ACTU Secretary Dave Oliver**  
**Australian Unions Organising Conference, Melbourne**  
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**\*\*\* CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY\*\*\***

Welcome to the 2014 Australian Unions Organising Conference.

This is, without any doubt, the most important event our movement has held since the federal election, six months ago.

The most important event any of you will attend this year.

Am I exaggerating?

Picture this:

It is the morning of Sunday, 25 November 2007.

In the living room of a house somewhere on the North Shore of Sydney, an emergency summit of the Liberal Party leadership is being held: Tony Abbott is there, along with Joe Hockey and Malcolm Turnbull.

So are Brian Loughnane, the Liberal Party Director, and their pollster, Mark Textor.

The cadaver-like figure of Philip Ruddock is lurking somewhere in the shadows.

You can feel Julie Bishop's death stare beaming from the speaker phone.

The mood is grim.

Labor has romped home with a 23 seat swing. After almost a dozen years, the Coalition is facing life in opposition.

Worse still, in the ultimate humiliation, their hero and mentor, John Howard has been turfed from his own seat.

The anger is palpable.

Finally someone speaks up.

"Those bloody unions," he says.

"Those bloody unions and their bloody Rights At Work campaign cost us the election."

There are nods all round.

Never again, they vow.

Never again will this happen.

The unions must be stopped.

And so a plan is hatched.

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Okay, so perhaps it didn't happen exactly like that.

But this much we know is true: for Tony Abbott and the Liberal Party, the WorkChoices dream has never gone away.

Abbott himself has written that:

“WorkChoices wasn't all bad. WorkChoices was a political mistake but it may not have been an economic one.”

In the darkest days for Australian workers under WorkChoices, the one thing standing between the Howard Government and their business mates, and the wages and conditions of Australian workers was the union movement.

Our great union movement rallied together in an unprecedented show of unity.

And the community came with us.

The Coalition now realises its mistake was to attack working people's rights, wages and conditions first, without taking the unions out of the picture first.

They are determined to ensure that we can never do to them again what we did in 2007.

The Liberal-National Party Coalition has spent the past six years fine-tuning their plan to use every means necessary to weaken, distract, neuter – and if possible – wipe out our movement.

And now we are seeing that plan being put into action.

During the heart of the campaign to get rid of WorkChoices there were not too many in the community who did not know what we stood for.

Survey after survey confirms that most Australians believe the country is better off with strong unions and that the type of Australia we have today, built on the fair go and equality, is due to the work of unions.

An active and popular union movement continues to be the main obstacle to the Coalition's agenda to strip away workers' rights and reduce their pay and conditions.

The number one objective of the Coalition strategy is to damage the reputation and standing of unions in the community.

They will exploit those rare cases, like Craig Thomson and Michael Williamson, and use their totally unacceptable behaviour to attack us.

Let me reiterate how offensive it is to steal from the members who have entrusted you to run their union.

There is no place for crooks in our movement and they need to be weeded out.

But these matters should be dealt with by the police, not to extract the maximum political mileage to create a false stereotype.

Another part of the strategy is to drain the union movement of resources and to tie it up in a heap of regulations and inquiries to distract them from their core business of taking on the bosses and representing workers and improving their pay and conditions.

They hope that with our resources otherwise occupied, unions will be flat chat simply providing a service to their members, let alone launching a counter-attack or campaigning in the community.

And if all of this damages or weakens the Labor Party and the Greens through their connections to unions, then all the better.

And then, having identified their objective of weakening the union movement, the Liberals asked themselves, how do we do that in one foul swoop?

What ticks all the boxes?

The light bulb moment: a royal commission into unions.

A royal commission would give the Coalition and their friends in the press, a platform to demonise and smear our movement.

A royal commission would force unions onto the back foot, making it difficult to campaign for a positive agenda.

Make no mistake, this royal commission is nothing other than a political and ideological witch-hunt designed to weaken Abbott's strongest opponents.

Don't be fooled that it is about anything else.

If it was really about corruption, there would be a hell of a lot of business types feeling pretty nervous right now.

Ask yourself this: does Tony Abbott really want a royal commission so we can have stronger, better, more democratic unions?

Of course he doesn't.

He wants the royal commission to wound unions.

It is purely a political strategy.

The Coalition wants to nobble the union movement, to de-legitimise it in the eyes of the Australian public.

So it is a sign of the warped priorities of this government, which at the very same moment as the head of Toyota was telling its workers that they had no future, Tony Abbott was locked up with his Cabinet for a very serious meeting.

What were they discussing?

An economic rescue package for manufacturing?

A jobs plan for life after the mining boom?

No, they were dotting the I's and crossing the t's on the terms of reference for Abbott's \$100 million royal commission into unions.

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At the same time as they use the royal commission to attempt to destroy unions, the other step in the Government's strategy is to soften the public up for major cuts to working pay and conditions.

Key to this is to manufacture a sense of crisis that the future of the Australian economy is at risk – and it is our workplace system that is at fault.

The government has a ready made vehicle to do this.

It's called the Productivity Commission.

The track record of the Productivity Commission is there for all to see.

This is a body that has long standing views when it comes to workplace relations.

The Productivity Commission has always unashamedly championed deregulation, unfettered free markets and the kind of economic ideology that has produced wide inequality, high unemployment, low wages and stagnant growth in the northern hemisphere.

It does not care about jobs.

Just last weekend, its chairman was interviewed by the Financial Review under a headline: "Let weak manufacturers fail: Productivity chair".

The Productivity Commission has a track record of recommending cuts to penalty rates and the wider use of individual contracts.

With its gloss of "independence", a Productivity Commission report is the ultimate Trojan horse for the government to attack pay and conditions and bring in WorkChoices Mark II.

And if you listen carefully, you can already hear them hammering in the nails to build that Trojan horse.

But this government is so impatient to get at workers' pay and conditions – and so arrogant - it is not even waiting for the Productivity Commission.

It has happily smeared the loyal employees of Toyota and Holden – and waved goodbye to their jobs – to push the furphy that labour costs in Australia are too high.

It has encouraged its business mates – people like Maurice Newman, the former stockbroker and head of the government's Business Advisory Council - to attack the minimum wage.

This week it will introduce legislation to make it easier for employers to enforce individual contracts that take away people's penalty rates and other conditions.

They are picking off sectors of the workforce one by one: childcare workers, truck drivers, miners, maritime workers, and many more.

The list goes on.

They are preparing a new public sector bargaining policy that will force government employees to trade-off rights and entitlements, or forego any pay rise – not to mention the savage job cuts.

As we saw at SPC, they are blackmailing companies to tear up their collective agreements and force workers onto Awards, or be refused industry assistance.

The role of governments should be to support businesses to restructure while protecting jobs – not getting rid of them.

And most despicably of all, they are blaming workers for the woes of a range of companies and for the government's own inaction and failure to protect jobs and industries, or to have a plan for future jobs.

They are basing all of this on the lie that Australians are overpaid and that we are on the verge of a wages explosion.

Does anyone seriously believe that a process worker on the production line at SPC on \$50,000 a year is well paid?

Take out tax and that leaves \$700 a week for rent, energy bills, groceries, petrol and education fees.

There's not a lot left over.

The government knows that our capacity to compete globally is due to a range of factors, including the high Australian dollar, dumping of cheap imports as a result of free trade agreements, incompetent managers, ageing infrastructure, and the lack of economies of scale in a country the size of Australia.

Instead, they've stood there waving goodbye as tens of thousands of jobs go out the door and overseas.

They've been out there and their friends in big business wanting to attack penalty rates and that's going to be the number one thing that's in their sights.

But the facts don't lie and the facts tell you that wages growth in Australia last year was the slowest on record.

It was lower than inflation.

And at the same time, productivity growth was the best for a decade.

And have you been paying attention to the profits that have been reported by big Australian companies in the past few weeks?

Multi-billion dollar profits by the likes of BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto, Wesfarmers and the Commonwealth Bank?

They are raking it in, while wages are stagnating.

This is just adding to growing inequality in Australia.

If we need an example of where that can end up, we need look no further than the US with its vast group of working poor.

A country where the multi-billionaire Warren Buffet admits: "there has been class warfare waged, and my class has won

"It's been a rout."

There is one thing standing between Tony Abbott and the economic inequality and division of the US and that is us.

I can assure everyone here that we will not lie down.

We will stand, we will unite, and we will fight.

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As it stands today, Australia is a great place to live with a high standard of living, and we want to keep it that way.

A cornerstone of our way of life is a decent wage - not just a minimum wage but a living wage.

A decent wage that includes penalty rates, overtime allowances and paid leave. A national minimum wage provides the income floor for all workers in Australia.

Australian Unions fought for the minimum wage when it was established more than a century ago and today 1.5 million workers rely on the annual wage case run by unions.

That's why it's more important than ever that unions are out there protecting the pay and conditions that make up a decent wage.

Unions will not stand by and allow the Australian way of life to be eroded - heading down a path towards a class of those who are permanently working poor.

Whatever is thrown at us, fighting for jobs, fighting for a decent standard of living and a better life must remain the primary focus of Australian Unions.

Australian workers expect no less of us.

So I urge you to knuckle down, don't let yourself be distracted, don't be swayed from spending every waking hour campaigning for the union agenda for rights at work, better pay and conditions, safer workplaces and a more equal Australia.

The issues that matter to working Australians.

Keep the faith and hold firm.

Because royal commissions will come and royal commissions will go.

Abbott will come and Abbott will go - just like Howard did before him

But unions will be here long after they are gone.

I want to make sure that we have a stronger, bigger movement to continue to campaign for a better life for workers today and for generations to follow.

Thank you.

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