

Closing Speech by ACTU Assistant Secretary Tim Lyons
Australian Unions Organising Conference, Melbourne
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***** CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*****

You get a lot of free advice being an ACTU Officer. I got some yesterday that I want to share with you.

A young bloke came up to me, and said he had a great idea for a new communications strategy for the union movement. And I thought here we go, another Don Draper.

“What we do” he said “is we put a big levy on all union members, and we give it all to the ACTU...”

I said, “Great idea, you’ll go a long way mate”. But he wasn’t finished.

“We use the money to buy as much TV time as we can for Eric Abetz to talk about flexibility and what he wants to do on IR. And at the end, we just put on the screen – “Is he on your side?””

I want to say something about the scandals our movement has experienced. You know the why it’s so appalling: (1) most important it’s an unforgivable ethical failing to be corrupt in our job, (2) it’s given our enemies a stick to beat us with, (3) being squeaky clean is what lets us be radical and (4) it’s dented the moral authority of trade unionism, which must always be a voice for honesty, transparency and accountability in the economy, in society and in public life.

I have thought a lot about the members of the HSU, who had their union stolen from them. But I also thought about the HSU organisers. Good, decent people, many of them from Branches against whom no allegation was ever made. You reckon you’ve done some hard meetings in workplaces. But they kept going, and they, and new officials, are rebuilding the union, because they care, just like the rest of us. Some of them are here with us, and I wanted to say “solidarity”.

And I also wanted to say this. Being a trade union official is an honourable thing to do with your life. I’m proud to be one. It’s about service to fellow workers and our community. And it’s a position of trust. We feel that more than anyone.

But I will not cop a lecture from shock-jocks and tobacco funded think-tanks about ethics. And as for those politicians crying crocodile tears about “honest workers” I say: we cared about workers when you didn’t, we still care when you’re pretending, and we will still care when you’ve forgotten again.

When I talk to the delegates and organisers of our movement they want to talk and argue and ask questions, because they care deeply about what we do, because they care about their members, and about their society. And we all have something else in common. We don’t want glorious honourable defeat.

Now, I’m a facts kind of person. I like legislation and spreadsheets and graphs. But I also like winning.

And to win we need more than just facts and our principles.

Our principles need to inform our action in two ways. First, our ideas and our program for a changed society needs to be real, evidence based and actually work. If we just make stuff up we are no better than the worst sort of Tea Partier, with their flat taxes and rants about invisible gasses. If we think all that matters is abstract values and reality we damned, we make this whole thing an exercise in moral vanity, and not a movement designed to really change anything. Second, communications strategies without a moral compass and an anchoring in a real-world program are cynical and anti-democratic.

There is a burden on us that doesn't fall on conservatives and reactionaries. They are trying to preserve privilege or tear things down. We are trying to build something better.

Put another way, I can explain why it's good to have a strong minimum wage. I can make the case for a mining tax. I can demonstrate how collective bargaining is in people's interests. Doing that is, and will always be, important. I'm right about that stuff. They are the ethically correct positions. You all agree with me. But it's not enough for us to be right if we don't take people with us.

In important way Anat's lesson about talking in a way that moves people, and encourages our activists to talk to other people so they get moving, is the linguistics equivalent of what Saul Alinsky, the pioneer of community organising, said about direct action: "A good tactic is one your people enjoy."

We need to be right on the values, correct on the facts and be able to bring people with us. As people have said in many different ways, there are no easy years when you are trying to change the world – or at least if there is an easy year, you've probably given up and not admitted it.

And to win we need to change.

"Path dependency" is an economics and social science concept (stay with me). It refers to the human tendency to make decisions based on what we've done in the past, even if the situation is new and completely different, making past choices useless.

We are at a moment when some of our old choices no longer help us make decisions about our future. A uniquely threatening moment in our history requires radical thinking and action.

If organised labour is to have a long-term meaningful future, we must experiment, adapt and change. We must do so quickly and collectively. We need to start now, including by taking advantage of the important strengths we have. Our movement remains large, has national reach, and has significant resources which can be harnessed. The alternative is managing decline. I'm not much interested in managing decline.

Experimentation and change cannot be centrally controlled, but it does require determined leadership – in Branches, National Unions and Peak Councils.

We need to bust open our movement, and find a way to let more people in. We make it hard for people to join and participate in a way that makes sense to them and speaks to their interests. Our structures are antiquated and bureaucratic. It doesn't have to be this way. As the UAW was growing rapidly in the United States eight decades ago, as part of an enormous rise of worker militancy and self-organising, any group of 6 workers could get together, say they wanted to form a local union, and they were in. The union was open, vibrant and worker driven. Too often, we've been closed, bureaucratic and legalistic.

Our movement (here and overseas) has always been at its best, our movement has grown, our movement has been its strongest and most effective, when we've been outward looking, encouraging, and welcoming. When we have given workers who are ready to move in support of their own interests encouragement and support. Our opponents want us tangled up in IR law because we end up telling people what they can't do, instead of helping them do what they want to do. We've been at our best when things are experimental, a bit chaotic, even (heaven forbid) radical or militant.

We need to change.

We need to bust open our structures in way that makes our organising more sustainable in more places. The traditional model of trade union organisation – a union shop with a collective agreement, remains a powerful force for good. It has changed millions of workers lives for the better and it still can. We need to make that work everywhere we can, and break down barriers – within unions and between unions - to making it work

But we also need to recognise that we need different models as well – that we can't make that traditional model work everywhere. We need to have different models of membership and organisation.

The ACTU is thinking and talking with union leaders about how we move a program of change: in traditional organising, in alternative membership and organising models, in how we do politics and influence public policy, and in how we influence capital markets and be better stewards of workers' capital. Your thinking and talking at this conference is an important contribution to that.

To quote Mao, we need to let a hundred flowers bloom. Now, he didn't mean it because he was a murderous dictator, but I do. A successful future for us is not one where we are conservative. Successful unions are a feat of imagination – of the workers who join them and the people that lead them.

I think you can test the quality of a proposition by the identity of its enemies.

Our enemies, the enemies of the proposition that workers are entitled to a measure of power over their lives, are autocrats – people who have power and are used to getting their own way. Autocrats of all stripes -whether they are Communists, people who run major corporations, or Mugabe - all oppose free trade unions and all fear workers having power.

We need to call this for what it is. I'm delighted to have been called a troglodyte in an Australian editorial. We need to remember that "partnership" has its limits – that the interests of our members are different to the interests of their bosses and that bosses causes most of the problems people have at work.

And we must be unafraid of conflict and controversy. We have a media environment that both thrives on conflict and is horrified by it. Controversy as blasphemy. We can't buy into this. If we do we risk sterilisation. We anaesthetise ourselves if we don't accept the reality of conflict and talk about power. Put another way, it's ok to want a decent pay rise, and RDOs, and it's OK to go on strike if the boss will not give it to you.

And in an environment where powerful forces are challenging the basic role of trade unions and the legitimacy of an organised worker voice, I say that an accommodation is not possible. Frankly, any concession we make will be pocketed and they will resume their fight. We can't make a concession that will make them stop, although you might get a pat on the head.

Think about how our enemies have moved the debate.

The old argument that "Unions have too much power" has effectively become an argument that unions are a bad thing per se. Complaints about small groups of "over-paid" workers has become a wholesale attack on both the safety net and bargained outcomes. Calls for "wage restraint" have become calls for significant reductions in nominal wages, that is, cuts to today's take home pay.

In a very real sense, the Royal Commission is designed to be a trial about the legitimacy of trade unionism. Allegations of corruption and other misbehaviour can be as damaging to reputations as the reality. The Royal Commission will unfold at the same time as a long Productivity Commission inquiry which amounts to trial regarding the nature and scope of the industrial relations system.

Both processes will feed into the next Federal Election, and policy afterwards. The aim is to present the “end” of unions as a good thing and reduced rights at work as an economic necessity (and both as inevitable).

But I think there’s an opportunity, particularly coupled with the Audit Commission and a coming Tax review (which will end up being mainly a push about the GST).

There is a powerful message to take to working people.

A Royal Commission to destroy your voice, a PC inquiry to destroy your rights at work and reduce wages, an Audit Commission to destroy parts of the Social wage, and a tax inquiry to shift tax off corporations and onto households.

That’s the reality of their program. Essentially saying that living standards need to fall. And it’s a program we can and must take advantage of.

In 2008 Obama had a line – actually a dim echo of FDR that made it through the focus groups – he talked of creating “an economy that honours the dignity of work.” Maybe it should have been – “an economy that gives everybody dignity”. Whatever you call it, the task of building that falls to us - nobody else is going to do it. I think that our ability to achieve for working people is limited only by our imagination.

Success requires more than possessing ethical superiority and practical justification. Being right is necessary but insufficient. Success requires economic power and popular support – this is the challenge for all of us, and the key to achieving our objectives. We need strength on the ground, growing diverse and vibrant unions, and workers on the move in support of their own interests.

Put simply, you get legitimacy when you can’t be ignored. You take it, you don’t get given it.

We need to build popular support and economic power, every day in all our work.

Working people rely on us to get this stuff right. Let’s get on with it.