

**Address by ACTU Secretary Dave Oliver to the LabourStart Global Solidary Conference
Friday, 23 May 2014
Berlin**

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

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today, and can I especially congratulate Eric Lee and his merry band of volunteers for putting together this LabourStart Global Solidarity Conference.

I had the privilege of delivering the keynote address at the last LabourStart conference in Sydney at the end of 2012, and I am proud to say that the Australian union movement has been a strong supporter of LabourStart since Eric first launched it in 1998.

With more than 500 correspondents around the world and dozens of sub-sites in more than 20 different languages, LabourStart is now an important part of the international trade union movement.

The value of LabourStart is not simply as a source of news, but a catalyst for global action by uniting activists around the world to quickly put pressure on a corporation or government when it oppresses workers' rights.

And indeed, one of the first online actions to be hosted by LabourStart was actually over a dispute at the Sydney Hilton hotel more than a decade ago. Thanks to LabourStart, the outcome was a new job security agreement.

Since 1998, LabourStart has run hundreds of online campaigns in more than a dozen languages. It has more than 100,000 campaign subscribers, and the largest campaigns get more than 10,000 supporters.

Online activism has grown massively in recent years global sites like Avaaz and change.org, but for our movement, LabourStart continues to be a crucial campaigning tool.

At any one time, LabourStart will be promoting up to a dozen campaigns on its website, whether they be a call to stop the persecution of social and labour activists in Ecuador, supporting strikers at one of the world's largest paper mills in Indonesia, seeking the end of violence and persecution of unionists in Colombia, or demanding compensation for the victims of the Rana Plaza collapse.

Australian unions – thinking local, acting global

Few of you will have visited Australia, and we might well be an island at the end of the world but we see ourselves as well and truly active participants in a global movement both through the ITUC and global union federations.

I don't need to remind you, of course, that the General Secretary of the ITUC, Sharan Burrow, is an Australian.

We sent a large delegation to the ITUC Congress, and Australian unions are also active in the International Transport Workers' Federation, IndustriALL, Education International, Uni and other global federations.

Many Australian unions also have less formal links with their international counterparts and campaign together with them.

Australia is the biggest and most advanced economy in the South Pacific region and that means extra responsibility for Australian unions to assist our smaller brothers and sisters.

The ACTU and its affiliates have been actively involved in the campaign to improve human and workplace rights in Fiji.

We have provided and continue to provide resources and knowledge to strengthen the capacity of unions in Timor Leste, the poorest country and newest democracy in our region, where pay, conditions and workers' rights are still developing.

And we have been campaigning for a total ban on the international trade of asbestos and are working with unions in south-east Asian countries like Laos where asbestos is still in everyday use and killing people, and those countries are being exploited by the big asbestos exporters as a new market.

The spread of global capitalism and neo-liberal, free market fundamentalism means unions must see themselves as part of a global network, and seek out how we can work together across borders.

We have seen that alongside the globalisation of capital has been a globalisation of corporate power.

Decisions made in boardrooms in London or New York or Frankfurt impact on the lives of workers in Bangladesh, Bangkok or Nairobi.

And the ripple effects are felt by other workers throughout the world, both developing and developed.

Globalisation has also seen the internationalisation of the free-market ideology of privatisation, deregulation and the reduction of workplace rights.

The assault on public sector workers that began in the United States has spread rapidly to Europe and to Australia.

And it is also flowing the other way: Rupert Murdoch's Australian born media empire has for decades been exporting severe neo-liberal propaganda to the rest of the world.

Unions are confronting these attacks in their own countries, but we also need to improve how we respond as a global movement.

Capital knows no boundaries, and so we must also be a globalised movement.

As Sharan Burrow has said:

The fallout from the Global Financial Crisis has led to a global slump in wages and growing inequality. Employers have used the economic crisis and the global threat on jobs as an excuse to step up their anti-union attacks.

The export of the American corporate model, represented by the American Chamber of Commerce, is driving an exploitative model of profit at any cost – and it must be stopped.

We need to start thinking as a global movement and fighting global campaigns – we need to recognise that what happens to labour rights in China or Qatar is important because capital is mobile and we need to ensure that workers throughout the world have the right to decent work, freedom of association, right to organise/right to bargain and right to strike.

The recent Australian experience

Australia changed government in September last year, with a conservative opposition sweeping away six years of Labor Government.

The new Abbott Government has wasted little time in implementing a savage agenda to widen inequality and undermine the high standard of living that average Australians enjoy thanks to our civilised workplace system which delivers decent wages and conditions.

We expected this attack, but the speed with which the Abbott Government has broken most of its election promises and implemented a masterplan drawn up by big business has taken us by surprise.

The recent Federal Budget put the meat on the bones of the ideological agenda of the Abbott Government.

It is nothing less than a wrecking ball to the Australian social wage.

It has ended universal free healthcare, raised the age of retirement to 70, cut age pensions and frozen superannuation increases, cut family payments, introduced harsh new measures for young jobseekers, taken an axe to industry assistance and training support programs, raised fees to attend university, privatised many of the few remaining government enterprises, and dozens more measures which we say will mean the end of the Australian way of life.

But this is just the beginning.

The conservatives and their allies in the big end of town have what they see as unfinished business in Australian workplaces.

Following a union-led campaign that helped change the government back in 2007, Labor reversed the attack on rights at work by restoring a system that gave primacy to collective bargaining over individual contracts, protected workers from unfair dismissal and provided a robust safety net, enabled unions to organise and represent workers, and reinstated an independent workplace umpire.

But the employer lobby has never accepted these reforms, and has campaigned ceaselessly against them for the past half-a-decade.

Since the Abbott Government has come to power, it has declared war on workers and their rights and conditions as “over-generous” and “unsustainable”.

There are moves afoot to cut the minimum wage and to abolish the extra rates that provide compensation to people for working on the weekend.

This would entrench a large class of working poor in the Australian community.

We expect much, much more when a review of the workplace system is conducted by the pro-business Productivity Commission later this year.

But this time, it is the existence of unions themselves that is also under threat.

Following some isolated cases of individual fraud and corruption, the government has appointed a special commission to investigate trade union governance.

This witch-hunt has been designed to damage and distract unions from our role defending and advancing the lives of Australian workers.

And the reason for this is simple: there is only one thing standing between the Abbott and the economic inequality and division of a country like the United States, and that is unions.

Rest assured that Australian unions will not take these attacks lying down.

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

Union growth is critical

As I say, globally, our challenges are not only on the wages, conditions, safety, and rights of workers, but the very existence of organised labour.

Big business and free market ideologues around the world are doing all they can to constrain the ability of unions to do their jobs, to outlaw much of our core activities, and to destroy our reputation and legitimacy in our communities.

We must resist these attacks, but we also must get our own house in order.

In developed economies in particular, unions are suffering declining membership and relevance.

In Australia in the 1980s, we had union density of close to 60% of the workforce.

Today it is 18%.

There are many reasons for this: structural economic change that has meant devastation for industries that were traditionally strongholds of union membership, legislative attacks that restrict our ability to represent and organise workers, and the changing nature of the workforce with growing casualisation and insecure work.

We are also, to an extent, a victim of our own success. The great battles fought to secure decent hours of work, weekends, public holidays, sick leave, equal pay, workplace safety and many other things we now take for granted have been fought and won.

A whole generation of workers are not fully aware of these achievements and to be honest, we have probably not done enough to explain to them.

But frankly, the time for excuses is over.

We need to front up to the reality that without high union density, without growth in the areas where we have been traditionally strong and into the new economy, we will struggle to influence the public debate. For the community to continue to align with us, unionism must be high, and we must be relevant to the broad population.

It is because unions have been weakened and declined in membership that inequality and injustice has been allowed to spread so rapidly in the US and the UK.

To be effective, we need to grow as a movement, both in member numbers, but just as importantly in economic power and influence in the industries in which we operate.

Unions must urgently modernise and embrace innovation and new technology as a matter of survival.

We must become a dynamic movement that is relevant to the aspirations and priorities of the modern workforce, which talks their language and offers them a strong value proposition to become a member.

We need to convert activists into members, and members into activists.

But we must also be a campaigning movement.

We have learnt from tough experience in Australia that transactional relationships with Labor governments too often result in disappointment and frustration, and the gains are frequently undone when the conservatives are in power.

All of our efforts at the ACTU are currently devoted to building our campaigning capacity and infrastructure so unions are a force to be reckoned with whoever is in power.

And to do that, I repeat: our movement needs to grow.

Conclusion

The relentless advance of globalisation continues without check.

The most recent phase of the war against economic fundamentalism has already been running for more than 30 years, since Reaganomics and Thatcherism swept the English-speaking world in the eighties and underwrote the rise to dominance of neo-liberalism.

Australia has not been immune from this.

Neo-liberalism champions individualism. It is inherently hostile to collective action. In the name of individual freedom and liberty its rallying cry is small government and deregulation.

But the world we are all born into is one of vast inequality, of power, wealth, income, and opportunity. This is true within and between countries. Without intervention these inequalities rise inexorably.

And the fact is that concentrations of wealth and power - concentrations of capital - can only be constrained through collective endeavour - through unions in the sphere of work, through community organisations in neighbourhoods and regions, and ultimately through governments in democratic nation states.

Yes, there is a role for markets. Yes, freedom and liberty are prime attributes of a fair and democratic society. But the power of collective action is the essential countervailing force to the inexorable concentration of capital.

As champions of collective endeavour, the global union movement must resist the policies that seek to constrain and shut down the collective rights of working people and the common interests of community.

The war has a long way to run. The global crisis exposed the flaws of this policy suite and they are clear for all to see - unemployment and misery at large.

There will be innumerable battles to come - small and local, large and national, huge and global. We need to build alliances and maintain solidarity.

While much of the current outlook for workers around the world is bleak, it is uplifting to know that unions are working together on global approaches to these issues.

Your conference plays an important role in building this international solidarity and I wish you well for your discussions over the next few days.

Thank you.