

**Speech by ACTU Secretary Dave Oliver to Wheeler Centre Points of View: Tom Roberts' 'Shearing the rams', 1890
Wednesday 2 July 2014**

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

Tom Roberts' painting 'Shearing the Rams' is deservedly one of the most iconic images of work from the period of early European settlement of Australia.

Its scenario, dominated by the figure of a shearer bent over a sheep in the foreground, instantly evoked the muscular, frontier spirit of the young Australian nation and helped to establish the image of the outback as the "real" Australia.

When Roberts set out to paint 'Shearing the Rams' in 1890, European settlement in Australia was a tick over a century old.

Federation was still a decade away.

Shearing sheds like the one on the vast Brocklesby sheep station in the Riverina which Roberts depicted in this painting were the engine rooms of the young Australian economy.

Wool, grown on stations in the outback and shipped to textile mills in England's north and midlands, was our number one export.

Tens of thousands of men earned their livelihood and supported their families through shearing.

Although carefully composed, 'Shearing the Rams' accurately captures the essence of shearing at the time.

This was hard, physical labour: bent over for hours on end, wrestling with large, angry sheep in sheds that were hot and dusty and poorly ventilated. Shearers used dangerous, sharp instruments to ply their trade.

Workplace injuries were commonplace.

But there is no hint in the painting of the dramatic changes taking place on sheep stations around Australia at the time.

Within the sheds confrontation between capital and labour was coming to a head, and militant unionism was being born.

By 1890, the Australian Shearers' Union could boast tens of thousands of members who were organising and agitating, demanding better pay and conditions from the squatters made rich from their labour.

There had been sporadic outbursts of industrial action around the colonies.

But in February 1891, a year after Roberts' painting was unveiled to the public, the ultimate showdown took place when shearers in Logan Downs went on strike when their employer attempted to wedge them from the union.

Their demands included continuation of existing rates of pay and protection of workers' rights.

The strike quickly spread across the state, met with fierce and sometimes violent opposition from employers, and continued through autumn.

The strikers were ultimately unsuccessful and returned to work, but their failure prompted the labour movement to turn its attention to Parliamentary politics as a means of advancing the interests of working people.

This led to the formation of the Australian Labor Party underneath the tree of knowledge at Barcaldine, north-west of Brisbane.

And from Labor we have many of the things that today make up the tenets of the Australian way of life: the minimum wage and equal pay, superannuation, the aged pension, universal access to healthcare and education to name a few.

Tom Roberts' painting captures a moment in time.

But even then, as Roberts was portraying workers in outback shearing sheds in 1890, the Australian economy and society was undergoing transformation.

Australia was rapidly becoming an urbanised society based around the coastal cities. Two-thirds of the population were already living in those cities.

Fledgling manufacturing and service industries were emerging, and gradually wool and agriculture would recede in importance both to the economy and as the providers of work.

Unionism was an essential element of Australian society from early on.

The Australian Shearers' Union – the precursor of the modern Australian Workers' Union – was formed near Ballarat in 1886.

But even earlier, masonry workers in Melbourne had won the eight-hour day in 1856.

And so, unions have been an intrinsic part of Australian life ever since.

It is tempting to speculate if Roberts was alive and painting today, what would he choose as his subject.

Perhaps he would fly to the remote Pilbara, where men and women just as tough and uncompromising as those shearers sweat under the harsh northern sun to dig iron ore out of the ground for shipment to China and other parts of the world.

The Australian economy currently is driven by those mineral exports just as the economy of the 1890s relied on wool exports.

Today's mining labourers use high-tech tools and equipment, but their struggles remain the same as those of the shearers: decent pay and conditions, safe workplaces, respect and rights at work, job security.

And the life of a fly-in-fly-out mining worker is not dissimilar to that of an itinerant shearer.

The role and make-up of unions has also changed immensely since the days of the shearers' strike and Tom Roberts' painting.

Over subsequent decades from the 1890s, many battles were fought and won: battles for weekends, for penalty rates, for sick leave and annual leave, for protection from unfair dismissal, equal pay, workers' compensation and superannuation.

The wages and conditions enjoyed by the workers of today are the result of the sacrifices and fights of their predecessors.

It is our challenge to ensure today's workers are aware of that heritage, and are aware that those wages and conditions were not delivered to workers on a platter by benevolent bosses.

They had to be fought for, and they can be just as easily taken away.

And unions have changed also.

The influence and power of the shearers today is a shadow of what it was in the 1890s.

The tough-as-nails and laconic shearer was the typical unionist of Tom Roberts' day; today's archetype is just as likely to be a young, university-educated, female child care worker.

But the values of unions – fairness, equality, justice – have not changed.

Some would argue that with the battles of the past having been won, there is no role for unions in the modern workplace.

But they would be wrong.

New fights loom on the horizon: the notion of the minimum wage and penalty rates are being directly challenged by employers and a conservative Government.

And alongside traditional concerns like a decent wage and a safe workplace, modern workers face new challenges of casualisation and insecure work, the blurring of work and non-work hours, technological change, and the squeeze of balancing work and family – not just the demands of children, but the pressures of caring for ageing parents.

The modern Australian economy is, of course, far more diverse than the economy at the time of 'Shearing the Rams'.

It is imperative we plan now for life after the mining boom.

Just as we could not ride forever on the sheep's back, Australia cannot always be just a quarry and a farm or a nice place to visit.

Time does not stand still, and the transformation of the Australian economy is continuing today.

Several years of a high currency, driven by the mining boom, have had a dramatic effect on domestic manufacturing and services.

Today, we are going through major structural change forced upon us by the sustained high value of the Australian dollar, the impact of free trade, technological change and changing government approaches to industry policy.

Today's economic challenges are different but no less compelling than those of previous generations.

They include the rise of insecure work, the spread of inequality, improving productivity growth, spreading the benefits of the mining boom, climate change, the rise of Asia, and preventing the hollowing out of our manufacturing base.

Unions are ready to play a part in how we deal with today's challenges and changes.

It is our strong belief that they are best confronted through collaboration between government, industry and workers represented by unions.

The future of the Australian economy and workforce must be planned with involvement from all stakeholders, not only the narrow, vested interests of big business.

Through engagement, not confrontation.

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As I look again at Roberts' Shearing the Rams, I believe that every Australian owes a debt of gratitude to the courageous members of the Australian Shearers' Union who embarked on that doomed strike action in 1891.

They stood up for what was right.

They wanted nothing more than a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, a roof over their head, and food on their table.

And just as importantly, a quota of respect and dignity at work.

But they took a stand not just for themselves, but for a better life for future generations.

A way of life that is uniquely Australian.

That much has not changed in the intervening 123 years.

Workers acting collectively have a proud history in this country and the union movement has been the clearest and strongest expression of the values of the Australian people.

In the face of attacks that have attempted to break our spirit and reduce our power, unions have never deviated from fighting for fairness at work and equal opportunity, and for the wealth of the nation to be shared to the benefit of all.

This is what the shearers stood for then. It is what we stand for now.

Thank you.