

'Our lives, our voice, our strength'

Ged Kearney address to the ACTU National Women's Conference
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Melbourne

***** 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 fantastic it is to be opening the ACTU National Women's Conference today – our first conference for several years.

This is a really important event for our movement.

The theme of this conference is *Our Lives, Our Voice, Our Strength*. Let's unpack this a little.

Our lives: we must identify what are the issues in the workplace and in society that impact on women in contemporary Australia.

Our voice: how do we campaign and advocate for improvements, how do we ensure these issues become core union issues and central to the agenda of the Australian union movement.

Our strength: women now make up more than 50% of the workforce, and 50% of the union movement. Many senior positions in the labour movement are filled by women. We have strength. Let's use it.

The next two days are about agenda setting and building our capacity to be strong advocates for women in the workplace and in society.

They are about ideas – coming up with them and turning them into reality.

This conference will look at the big picture and examine what are the practical steps we need to take, what do our campaigns need to look like, how do we organise women to be more active and give them a stronger voice, and what do modern unions need to look like.

Unions must reflect their women member's issues in their industrial agendas and include women's issues as part of their strategic planning.

I'm expecting it to be thought provoking and I'm hoping to be inspired.

We're fighting for women in 2014

I'd like to share a story with you.

It's a true story, and it's heartbreaking.

Janette is a 22-year-old single mother of a four year old boy.

She works for a global coffee chain in a casual part-time job, with dreams of a better life for herself and her boy.

But the dreams are constantly put on hold by the everyday trials she faces.

Abandoned by the boy's father, she is the sole carer of her child. They live on the verge of homelessness, often relying on the goodwill of relatives and co-workers for a bed for the night.

Unable to secure permanent work but also needing some flexibility to care for her boy, she takes whatever shifts she can get, frequently with only a few days' notice, constantly juggling childcare for her son, pleading with relatives when daycare is not available, commuting long distances by public transport to work, irregular shifts and uncertain pay, and confronted with mounting bills all the time.

"I just want to be able to live happily and comfortably," she laments.

It's not much to ask for.

Janette's story was published in the *New York Times* last week, and although it comes from America, it is happening all around us in Australia today.

Women are facing intolerable pressures from insecure work, lower pay, lack of opportunities for career advancement, limited options for training and inflexible working arrangements that make it nigh-on impossible to manage work and family responsibilities.

Too often, public discussion about women in the workforce is dominated by the lack of women on company boards, or the glass ceiling for professional women.

Not enough is said about the far greater issues faced by women in all workplaces.

Issues like discrimination, bullying and harassment, and lower pay and less secure jobs are common to women in all industries.

We are also finding that as more women enter what have traditionally been male-dominated industries, they find their worksites even still lack proper toilets and amenities for women.

In 2014, women make up half the total workforce yet earn 18.2% - or \$283.20 a week - less than average men's wages - the widest gender pay gap for 20 years.

And this imbalance continues into retirement.

On average, a woman's superannuation balance is almost half that of a man's, a difference of almost \$38,000.

All of us today will have different experiences at work from each other.

Some of you will come from unions where the voice of women is already strong.

But others will be from traditionally male-dominated industries and the agenda of your union will reflect that.

But we share common resolve to fight to overcome this inequality and for the advancement of women at work and in the community.

The ACTU has identified four key areas of campaigning for women over the next few years.

WE will fight . . . to ensure that women receive equal pay and equal treatment.

We are still paid less and suffer discrimination every day.

Just recently, the Sex Discrimination Commissioner released the report into pregnancy discrimination that found that almost 50% of mothers have experienced discrimination in the workplace at some point during pregnancy, parental leave or when they returned to work.

We need to end pregnancy discrimination, and also sexual harassment and bullying, and create workplaces where women workers are valued and supported.

And we want to extend the pay equity gains of social and community services workers to other industries where a predominantly female workforce has been historically underpaid.

WE will fight . . . so that women can better balance their work and family.

For women, there is no greater cause of anxiety and stress than the conflict between wanting to shine in our jobs and care for our loved ones as well.

Unions are working to improve our rights by campaigning for the right to family friendly conditions for all workers, including the right to go part-time when we return after giving birth.

The paid parental leave scheme has made a real difference for working women, but we have always maintained the 18 weeks government payment at the minimum wage is not the end.

We will continue to campaign for changes to the right to request work arrangements to care for dependents so they are available to all employees with caring responsibilities.

And workers must have a right of appeal against an employer's unreasonable refusal.

Equally important in allowing women to balance their dual responsibilities is better access to quality, affordable child, disability and elder care services.

WE will fight . . . to maintain rights at work and minimum standards.

Australia has one of the highest rates in the OECD of dependence of women on part-time and casual jobs to combine work and family responsibilities; and women continue to be over-represented in low-paid jobs dependent on minimum wages and conditions.

The trend towards outsourcing and decentralising care work and dismantling the role of government as a service provider in social and community services, with the consequent pressure on private sector providers to maximise profits, will particularly disadvantage women working in those sectors.

This devolution of services from central providers will make it much more difficult to regulate workplace conditions and wages, to ensure that rights and entitlements are being respected, and to organise as unions.

The rights we will seek to improve include increasing the minimum wage, paid domestic violence leave, improved job security, and access to leave and other rights for workers in insecure jobs.

But none of three priorities I have listed above will come about without the fourth: a strong voice at work and in the community.

The union movement needs women members to actively participate and shape our policy and campaign activities.

It is still the case that although women now make up half the workforce and half the union membership; they are not proportionally represented in leadership positions within their unions and therefore have less influence in decision making levels.

Women's influence at senior decision making levels is critical to ensure the union movement advocates for "women's" issues such as pay equity, childcare, work life balance etc.

The good news is that there has been significant progress over the past decade.

To better represent women in positions of leadership, we need to improve support for them to fully take part in paid work, and have access to senior roles.

The attack on the social compact

These workplace-based issues cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader attacks on social cohesion from the Abbott Government.

What we are seeing through the Budget and the National Commission of Audit is the biggest attack ever on the social wage established over many decades by the labour movement.

The values of fairness, decency and equality on which Australia was built are under threat.

Unions have always believed that a decent society is one where everyone has basic rights and equal opportunity, where we provide social protections to look after those who for one reason or another would fall between the cracks, we reward hard work, and we ensure that wealth is spread evenly.

Where we recognise that most people will need help from government at some point in their lives, to deal with illness, ageing, misfortune and that this help should be a matter of rights, not of charity.

This spirit of a fair go is imbued in our national character. It is what underpins the minimum wage and job security, an adequate welfare system, accessible public health and education, and a plethora of public services.

It was the labour movement that put in place all of the institutions that now form the social wage: Medicare, accessible tertiary education, pensions, wide ranging welfare, workers' rights, decent public education, anti-discrimination laws.

They are ours to claim and now sadly defend.

This has always been our role to campaign for not just better workplaces, but a more equal, more just society.

The Abbott Government has taken a wrecking ball to this social wage that unions spent the best part of a century in building.

Clearly the Liberal Government vision is of a harsher, less equal Australia.

Universal healthcare is over with, the introduction of a Medicare co-payment which will put pressure on low income families who for going to the doctor will now become a financial decision.

They are cutting the real value of all pensions – including the age and disability support pensions, and single parents payment – which in today's terms, will be a cut of about \$200 a fortnight by 2030 to those people that can least afford it.

In a disgraceful move young job seekers will need to participate in job search and employment services for six months before they can begin receiving Newstart or youth allowance that will leave these people in poverty.

Young people who are training to learn a trade will lose direct financial support and instead be saddled with debt well into their working lives.

The Government is making it harder for Australians to save for a decent retirement by freezing the increase to the Super Guarantee for four years as well as lifting the retirement age to 70.

Fees for university will go through the roof and students will start paying real interest on their debts and pay them back from a lower income.

This year's budget cuts fall disproportionately on women, especially those earning low incomes or working part-time or casual jobs.

Massive cuts to education, health and community services will cause job losses for thousands of women.

Women rely on family payments, on family friendly work arrangements, on public services.

It is women who mostly value an accessible health and education system.

The Coalition Government doesn't understand women, and with just one woman in the Cabinet, it clearly doesn't respect us. Tony Abbott's entire public life has been a litany of snubs and insults to women.

This is the man who once said of a paid parental leave scheme: "Over my dead body".

Who once said: "If it's true that men have more power generally speaking than women, is that a bad thing?"

And who once said: "I don't think it's a bad thing at all that we always have an enormous number of women simply doing housework".

This is our moment

But you know what? This is our moment. We can't lose it.

Australians in their tens of thousands have taken a stand against the aggressive, full frontal attack on our society by the current Government.

All this year, people from all around Australia have told me they want a Government that will stand up for a civil society, for good services and decent welfare.

Our vision must be for 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 at work.

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.

If there’s one thing the union movement knows how to do better than anyone else it is fight against injustice in the workplace and the community.

And this is our moment. We in the union movement are going to be out there for the next year talking to the people of Australia about the neo-liberal attack on our way of life.

How this government is blatantly reneging on their part of the social compact and how the union movement has a better plan, better vision, a better deal.

And women are going to have to play their part more than ever if our response is going to be real, relevant and right.

Women have to be part of the solution-making process, and as union women, we have to show the way for all women.

Nothing has ever been handed to working people on a platter.

It has had to be fought for, by using the collective strength of people united in unions to take on the powerful institutions in our society: Parliament, big business, the law, and the media.

And the fight does not stop with victory. We have to remain vigilant and continue to fight to defend what has been won.

We have to be prepared to fight with energy and passion for what we believe in and for what we know is for the good of the nation.

It can be easy to get fixated on all the things we are battling at the moment and lose sight of the big picture and what it is we want as women.

So my final message to you today is that sure, we have to defend what has been gained but we also need to keep pushing and striving for better lives and a better future for working people.

As unionists, we need to keep an eye on the next horizon, we need to turn up the volume, we need to get active, and then bring the community with us.

So let’s get on with it.

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