

## International

### Developments since Congress 2009

As the world's 13<sup>th</sup> largest economy, in the past three years, Australia has played an influential role as a middle power on a number of global issues. Climate change remains an important international issue, and in 2010 and 2011, the Australian Government participated in global negotiations in Cancun and Durban respectively. Also in 2011, Australia actively supported democratic movements in Libya and Egypt as part of the Arab Spring uprising. The international trade union movement has also been active in the Arab Spring movement, with around 77 trade unions across the Middle East signing the Arab Countries Declaration for Democracy and Social Justice. The Declaration called for the establishment of free and independent trade unions in the region as a vehicle for improving basic rights and achieving democratic reforms that allow people to organise collectively to improve their living standards and working conditions.

Our engagement with the Asia-Pacific region remains important, and in 2011 the Commonwealth Government commissioned a White Paper on 'Australia in the Asian Century', expected to be released by mid-2012. Australia continues to support nuclear non-proliferation through the establishment of the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative with Japan. In addition, the Commonwealth Government supports the work of the International Labour Organisation, through the ratification of the ILO Maritime Labour Convention and the ILO Domestic Workers' Convention. The government has committed to funding the Australia - ILO Partnership Agreement 2010-2015 and the Pacific Growth and Employment Plan.

### Key issues

The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) has led to a downturn in the world economy, which has disproportionately affected low-paid workers and led to increased unemployment in many countries. The GFC originated in the US private sector in 2008, and has since led to a sovereign debt crisis within the European Union. Research by the IMF has shown that global unemployment has risen by 14% since 2007, with 210 million people across the world now unemployed as a result of the GFC. Over the next 10 years, more than 440 million jobs will need to be created to reverse the high unemployment rate.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joint IMO-ILF Discussion Paper. 'The Challenges of Growth, Employment and Social Cohesion.' Oslo Conference, 2010

In response to these issues, Global Unions developed the Washington Declaration as part of the G20 summit in 2008. The Washington Declaration called for investment in infrastructure and low-carbon jobs as well as the reregulation of financial markets by governments to ensure that corporations take responsibility for risky business decisions. The economic bailout of large financial institutions has allowed businesses to return to profits, but often at the expense of workers' jobs, leading to worldwide protests as part of the Occupy movement. Major financial reforms are needed to ensure that this does not happen again.

Unions remain committed to the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. In particular, the ILO has identified the decent work agenda as a major priority in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. Decent work is about creating jobs, guaranteeing rights at work, extending social protection, and promoting social dialogue. The decent work agenda aligns closely with Australia's aid priorities and national interest, as a living wage can assist in lifting families and communities out of poverty. It is important to note that economic growth at a national level does not always trickle down to guarantee increased living standards within developing communities. If not handled correctly, in some instances economic growth in developing countries can lead to deepening inequalities and a race to the bottom on wages and conditions. The decent work agenda also advocates for social protections, in particular access to essential services such as healthcare and education, as a means of lifting people out of poverty. Trade unions and government play a vital role as partners in the decent work agenda through campaigning and advocacy work in Australia and internationally.

A major part of our work is supporting the growth of trade unionism and improvements to workplace entitlements in developing regions. Internationally, unions have noted with concern recent developments in Burma and Fiji. The Bainimarama military regime in Fiji has acted in a number of ways to discourage trade union membership, for example, by amending legislation in August 2011 to prohibit the deduction of union dues from civil servants' pay. Government employees are also excluded from a number of fundamental workplace rights that apply in the private sector. In addition, trade unions in Fiji face prohibitions against industrial action, bargaining, agreements and fundamental entitlements such as overtime. There are also reports of union delegates and officials being subject to harassment, threats and intimidation. The situation in Burma is even worse, with severe restrictions placed on trade unions preventing them from forming, organising, assembling, bargaining or striking.

## Agenda 2012-2015

Enhancing international co-operation is a focus of the International policy and will remain an important part of the union agenda over the next three years. The policy advocates for Australia to remain an active member of the Asia-Pacific region through participation in regional forums. In particular, the policy advocates for a global agreement to reduce the effects of climate change, including funding to assist low-paid workers to transition to a global low-carbon economy in both developed and developing countries.

During the recovery period of the GFC, the policy outlines unions' commitment to reforming international finance, to ensure that incomes are distributed more equitably to the lowest paid, and as part of our commitment to returning unemployment to pre-2008 levels. In 2012, Global Unions are continuing the campaign for financial reform

and policies for jobs-centred growth, calling on G20 governments to develop job targets to increase employment levels, and to provide adequate funding to social protection projects to support their most vulnerable workers. In addition the policy supports the Global Unions' policy package calls for the reform of large financial institutions that are 'too big to fail' to ensure proper oversight, transparency and accountability measures. As part of the decent work agenda, unions will also advocate for employment-led growth by ensuring that economic growth leads to a corresponding rise in living standards, wages, and workplace entitlements.

The policy provides that Australian unions will continue to work co-operatively with the Global Union Federations, the International Trade Union Confederation, the Global Unions Council and the International Labour Organisation to uphold workers' rights and promote peace, social justice, democratic reform and improvements to living and working standards. The policy recognises that Australian unions are strong supporters of improving wages and conditions and supporting active growth in trade unionism for workers in developing countries, through our support for Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA, and through supporting increases to funding for foreign aid projects. In particular, unions commit in the policy to continue to monitor the situations in Fiji and Burma to draw attention to the serious problems that workers and trade unionists face in those countries.