

**ACTU Executive and Indigenous Leadership Conference
Formal opening by ACTU President Ged Kearney
Tuesday, 16 August 2016**

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What priorities should the new government make? How will we tackle the growing problem of unemployment among our young people? How do we respond to the election of extreme right wing Senators without further empowering them? How do we support social change that improves the lives of aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, of our LGBTI communities, migrant workers, the unemployed, the retired?

The first post-election Executive, with a freshly returned Liberal government looking shakier and shakier before it even has a chance to sit, is an important occasion in itself and would ordinarily be a key date on our calendar.

Given we are meeting in the Northern Territory, under the shadow of yet another Royal Commission into yet another aspect of the systematic oppression of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters, it is especially incumbent on us as union leaders to acknowledge that broader context of our meeting today.

Tomorrow we have the Innovation & Growth: Indigenous Leadership Symposium followed by the Wave Hill Walk Off 50 year commemoration.

In the space of just a few days, we in the union movement will look forward and we will look back.

We will look back to a time when unions stood shoulder to shoulder with the Gurindji people – and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from all nations – in an era of profound social conflict for Australia.

And we will look forward to continuing that legacy of solidarity as we support and stand with today's Indigenous leaders to face up to many of the same challenges that present themselves to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers even today.

Past and present are colliding as Indigenous Australians continue to feel the repercussions of centuries of racist, systematic oppression from Australian Governments at all levels.

I'm ashamed to admit that many of these systems are still up and running. We have seen too many clear examples of this in the news recently.

Far from being an isolated, spontaneously occurring anomalies, it's very easy to draw a straight line from the tough talking, flame-fanning rhetoric of the NT Government, the shameless indifference of the Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion through the overwhelming double standard at all levels of our judiciary.

The way the aftermath and resulting royal commission was handled by the Indigenous Affairs Minister, along with the Prime Minister himself, demonstrates yet again the sort of failed top down response we are too used to seeing in these situations.

It was disappointing, but hardly surprising from a Liberal Government futilely grasping for a fresh start after such an abysmal election.

After the election: where to now for the Government?

We've just come out of the longest Federal Election campaign on record. All across our movement, people poured in their heart and soul and the results we achieved were absolutely amazing.

Usually, this time post-election allows for reflection and refocussing – but in a sense we find ourselves stuck in some sort of perpetual campaign.

Malcolm Turnbull and the Liberal Party may have won a majority, but by the slimmest possible margin - in a large part thanks to the mighty union movement!

Now every two-bit wannabe, headline making backbencher is geared up with a shopping list of demands that will make even the blandest of parliamentary votes a life or death Prime Ministerial tightrope walk. Where the smallest slip could lead to a death denying fall into another election campaign.

It's still unclear exactly how they intend to proceed when parliament resumes on 30 August, but the smart money is on what Bob Katter would colourfully term "union bashing."

Having nominally based the pretence for a whole double dissolution campaign - and how well that has worked out by the way - on them, it would seem that our old friends the ABCC and Reg Orgs are back again.

We've had the employment minister out revving up the mining bosses' cheer squad with tough talk on right of entry, EBAs and goodness knows what else.

It's looking like a tough slog for working people coming up, so it's never been more important for unions to be right on our game.

Although our one saving grace may be in the recent history that shows Malcolm Turnbull, like Tony Abbott before him, has a singular gift for putting senate cross benchers offside.

Beyond the usual anti-union hit list, what mandate has this government really got?

Corporate tax cuts? Good luck getting handouts to big banks, mining companies and off shore multi-nationals through this senate.

Super reform? The self-appointed, internal opposition frontbench of Abetz, Bernardi and Christiansen are doing their level best to make sure what was one of their few, vaguely acceptable policies never sees the light of day in parliament.

Medicare? The amazing efforts of the union movement forced a humiliating retreat from Malcolm Turnbull. It would take hitherto unseen guts, determination and decisiveness from the Prime Minister to even vaguely support any policy that falls short of 100%, rock solid commitment to this national treasure.

Perhaps they could just recycle an old to do list and take another crack at passing one of the last three Federal budgets that are still languishing in some sort of half-forgotten Canberra limbo?

Instead of leadership, policy advocacy or really any idea of any substance to tackle the challenges we face as a nation, what we are seeing rise up and to fill the vacuum is the ugly side of politics, which stands in stark opposition to our values as union members.

We're seeing:

- The inevitable return of Pauline Hanson - this time, God help us, with 400% the parliamentary representation.
- The aforementioned empowered Liberal extreme right dragging a Prime Minister, once lauded as a progressive hero, further and further away from the mainstream of Australian voters.
- The infighting, backflips and weasel words over same sex marriage – an issue that divides the Liberal party room much more starkly than it does the public who just want our elected representatives to do the job we sent them to Canberra to do.

As a leading progressive organisation, we have a lot of fronts to fight on.

But perhaps most important is continuing to stand with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander comrades in the ongoing fight for Indigenous rights at work – such as CDP, retirement savings and the Indigenous Advancement Strategy.

I would like to acknowledge the Indigenous committee, Jo Kerr, and Kara Keys, our Indigenous officer and our indigenous organisers for a right on deadly campaign agenda that had aboriginal and Torres Strait islander issues front and centre where it mattered. And it matters. And it made a difference.

We will also stand together on broader issues – developing an acceptable form of constitutional recognition, negotiation of a treaty and the desperate need for a much wider and deeper investigation of the criminal justice system's treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than that offered by this government.

And we will join the push back against racial vilification with all our might, our resources and our union heart.

Looking back: Unions and Wave Hill

Next week marks the 50th anniversary of Australia's single longest strike and one of the most important industrial disputes in the Australian Trade Union movement's proud history – the Wave Hill Walk Off.

In August 1966, Vincent Lingiari led the strike of 200 Aboriginal stockmen, domestic servants and their families. The strike, over their appalling wages and conditions, eventually saw the end of discriminatory employment practices and was the catalyst for the land rights movement in Australia.

This was a dispute born from the colonial mindset that drove so much oppression around the world.

It was a battle between a big cattle station owner, with impeccable political connections

and impressive financial resources, and a group of workers left with little legal protection and even fewer workplace rights.

A classic David and Goliath tale.

Throughout the protracted industrial and land rights dispute the Australian trade union movement stood shoulder to shoulder with the Gurindji workers.

Unions provided significant support to workers and their families such as providing food and supplies, organising forums and protests in capital cities and sponsoring an Aboriginal union organiser (NAWU) Mr Daniels to speak to trade union members down the breadth of the east coast to garner support for Aboriginal workers in the NT.

While The Wave Hill Walk Off was half a century ago - and it's already part of modern Australian History - it's important to remember that 50 years is not so long ago. For a culture that is millennia old, it is merely the blink of an eye.

We also must remember that the Walk Off was the start of something, not the end.

The Wave Hill dispute was not properly concluded until Vincent Lingiari accepted a pastoral lease over the traditional Gurindji country from Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1975, almost a decade later.

And so many of the industrial challenges raised at that time are still unresolved today.

In 2016, why are we persisting with segregated workplace laws, like CDP, that disproportionately impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? Why does this government continue to take an "out of sight out of mind" approach to regional job creation, leaving countless communities high and dry?

Conclusion – we must listen

We'll shortly hear from the Gurindji themselves, who will tell us their story.

This is not just a formality, or a routine part of today's agenda: this is the key for all Australians as we continue to travel the road towards true reconciliation together.

Our leaders can't sit in Canberra, Sydney or Melbourne and make grand pronouncements about the best policy. This has been the failed approach for centuries, and sadly it looks to be continuing under the current Government.

The journey may not be simple, but the first step is: listen, with respect. Then Act with Honour, stand in Solidarity.

It's fitting that that's the theme for the 50th anniversary: Respect. Honour. Solidarity.

This is what we within the union movement have always strived to do, and it is what we hope that all Australians – especially those who are elected members of our government – will also commit to do.

Thank you.

ENDS