

Wednesday, 16 February 2011

Unions to form new partnership to advance economic and social justice for Indigenous Australians

Unions will today announce a new partnership with indigenous Australians to campaign to improve the lives of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through decent jobs and sustainable economic development.

Drawing on the tradition of the Aboriginal pastoral workers who walked off the Wave Hill Station in 1966 in protest at their poor working conditions and treatment, the ACTU pledges to work hand-in-hand with indigenous Australians to advocate for better social and economic opportunities.

“Australian unions have always stood by our Indigenous brothers and sisters,” said ACTU Secretary Jeff Lawrence, who will open the ACTU Indigenous Conference in Darwin today. “We stood with Indigenous workers in the Wave Hill Station walk out; fighting for land rights, and stolen wages.

“But it is clear that Indigenous Australians have been left behind by the strong growth of the Australian economy over the past decade, so today we are announcing a greater emphasis and focus of the union movement on what is happening in Indigenous communities now.

“While unions have been able to achieve significant gains for members and communities through bargaining and community campaigning, thousands of Indigenous workers remain without basic rights and are usually employed in the most vulnerable and insecure types of work.

“Drawing on union principles of justice, rights for all workers, and equality, the ACTU is committed to the development of an effective partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to redress economic and social disadvantage, particularly in relation to employment.”

Mr Lawrence will today present a report on a delegation of Australian union officials that visited central Australia in November last year to observe first-hand the Northern Territory Emergency Response (“the Intervention”).

The delegation has identified shortcomings in self-determination, empowerment and representation in the Intervention. The union delegation was also told about the failures of the Community Development Employment Program, which has further entrenched Aboriginal people in economic dependency, along with the lack of opportunities for formal employment and training.

The three-day ACTU Indigenous Conference will discuss an action plan for how to deal with the Intervention, for employment and for social justice.

“The courage and commitment of Gurundji people who led the walk-off at Wave Hill Station in 1966 in pursuit of equal wages and treatment must not be forgotten,” Mr Lawrence said.

“This was a pivotal moment in not only the assertion of indigenous rights, including self-determination, but in Australian workers’ rights. We have a responsibility to carry on their work, so that all Indigenous Australians experience the opportunities a First World country provides. As always, the pathway to economic development is through decent employment and workplace rights.”

The ACTU Indigenous Conference opens at 9.15am TODAY at The Travelodge, Mirambeena Resort, Cnr Cavenagh & Lindsay St, Darwin

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