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2010 ACTU Whitlam Lecture by Ross Gittins: ACTU comments

Ross Gittins, economic columnist for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* will deliver the ACTU Whitlam Lecture in Melbourne on Tuesday, 30 November 2010.

The ACTU Whitlam lecture is a series of occasional lectures on topics of national importance.

The last ACTU Whitlam Lecture was delivered by Bernie Fraser, former Reserve Bank of Australia Governor on 9 December 2008.

This year, Ross Gittins has been asked by the ACTU to address the topic of economic inequality and answer the question "Is Australia the Land of the Fair Go?"

Commenting on Gittins' address, ACTU President Ged Kearney said:

"Unions are passionately concerned about inequality and ensuring that working people get a fair share of the economic wealth they create. It is the reason unions were formed and what still drives us today.

"We want to make sure all Australians enjoy a decent standard of living, not just the rich.

"It is worrying to see Ross Gittins identifying a marked widening of the gap between rich and poor in Australia in recent years. As Gittins points out, this sudden deterioration is due to the resources boom, the booming sharemarket pre-GFC, executive salaries and income-tax cuts that have benefited people on high incomes.

"Gittins is also right to identify the major shift which has occurred in our economy with the transfer of risk from employers onto workers through the growing casualisation of the workforce, including the spread of sham independent contracting.

"Unions are determined to campaign hard to deal with rising inequality on a number of fronts:

- In the workplace we want to make sure that workers benefit through the wider use of collective bargaining and to reduce the incidence of casual and contract jobs that leave workers without a secure job or income for their family.
- In terms of economic and tax policy, we agree with Gittins that there should be reform of superannuation taxes, which are biased heavily in favour of high income earners.
- We also reject the Henry Review's proposed flattening of income tax scales and believe more needs to be done to deliver a fairer tax and welfare system for low and middle income Australians.
- Unions would like to see greater investment in education, especially in public schools and TAFE, to improve social mobility by giving all Australians a chance of a better job and to improve the overall skills and productivity of our workforce.
- More also needs to be done to help the most disadvantaged in our community, especially Indigenous Australians, the long-term unemployed and sole parents. It is terribly unfair that unemployment benefits leave many jobless people well below the poverty line. In this regard, we do support Gittins' call for solidarity with jobless people."

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