

Michele O'Neil, President ACTU

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Check against delivery

Thank you to everyone for being here today, and to the National Press Club for your important work and the opportunity to speak with you today.

I want to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we meet on today - the Ngunnawal people and pay all my respect to elders past and present. It always was and it always will be Aboriginal land.

I also want to take this opportunity to express the ACTU's support, heeding the call of First Nations people, for recognition and a Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Constitution. Having the voices of First Nations peoples listened to and respected is key to improving the lives of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people. The Australian union movement has proudly committed to supporting the 'yes' campaign in the referendum. We will put our shoulder to this wheel.

I want to welcome all the union members with me here in Canberra in the audience today. I want to particularly thank those of you who work in the coal fired power industry who have travelled from all over the country to be here, members of the Mining and Energy Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, The Australian Services Union, the Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Workers Union.

You don't need to have witnessed the fires sweep Mallacoota, or the floods drown Lismore and the Kimberley's; or the coral bleach in Cairns, or the fish die in the Darling River, to know that climate change poses an existential threat to Australia. You can just head down to your local construction site, or primary school, or aged care facility on one of those increasingly frequent days when the temperature nudges 40 C, as it's done in Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane over the past few weeks.

You'll see it in how the teachers struggle to teach, and the students struggle to learn.

In how the aged care workers keep our elders inside for fear of heat stroke.

In how construction workers battle to get the job done in temperatures approaching the limit of what the human body can endure.

I am speaking to you today because the Australian union movement knows it's not a choice between jobs and our climate - it's a responsibility to act on both.

We're here because our previous Federal Government weaponised this false choice in order to shirk their own responsibility to act on climate change.

Refusing to lead, head in the sand—irresponsible, ideological, and reckless.

Their refusal to act has made the job before us both more challenging and more urgent. We will need serious ambition to get it right.

Climate change poses a profound material threat to the Australian way of life, to our ability to work, play, and live in the places we call home. If we do not find it within ourselves to take the necessary action in time, the lives of ordinary Australians will grow more grueling and less safe with each passing year.

But within this threat lies opportunity to rival any in our nation's history.

Decarbonizing our economy could generate hundreds of thousands of good jobs, healthier and more equitable communities, and a renewed national prosperity—all while safeguarding Australians from spiralling climate disasters.

To seize this enormous opportunity, we need to build an economy that restores the planet on which it relies.

That means turning an extractive economy reliant on fossil carbon into a circular economy powered by clean energy, a fundamental transformation that, according to the best science, we have, at most, three decades to execute.

All of which raises a fundamental question.

In the race to repower our economy in the *next* three decades, what happens to the workers and communities who have been powering it for the last ***fifteen*** decades?

I'm talking about the highly skilled, hard working women and men who work in high-carbon industries. I'm extremely honoured to have some of them here in the audience with me today. I'm talking about their families, many of whom have been keeping the lights on in this country for generations. I'm talking about their communities — from the Hunter Valley, to central Queensland, to Collie, Western Australia — communities that have built entire livelihoods and legacies on industries like coal-fired power generation, which is now rapidly phasing down.

What happens to them?

I'm talking too about their unions, who have lead world leading struggles to improve workplace health and safety laws that have not just saved mine workers lives, but today help keep safe every, single worker in Australia.

Way back in 2015, the International Labour Organisation adopted a set of landmark guidelines aimed at ensuring a “just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies.”

The phrase “just transition” has since been widely popularised (and in Australia politicised) but the original concept was simple: both the risks and benefits of the transition to a net zero economy should be distributed equally across society. *Everyone* should have a fair go.

Here in Australia, we have legislated the goal of achieving net zero emissions by the year 2050. This is an essential goal, a goal we waited too long to set, a goal that has the support of a clear majority of Australians and, crucially, was set through the complex process of collective decision-making enshrined in our democracy.

It is a project we are embarking on as a nation. And we have a choice to make about how we do it. Do we pursue our goal together, making sure every worker and community has a place to thrive in the future we’re building?

Or do we allow traditional energy communities to carry all the risk, letting the transition hollow them out and cast them aside, so that blue collar workers, their families and communities are left holding the bag?

The stakes of that question are far too high to leave to the whims of the private market.

This transition will not be fair by accident.

Without active government planning and coordination, it will be deeply unfair and deeply damaging to the very communities who've helped forge Australia's prosperity.

Governments helped build these high-carbon energy assets and industries and now it's the government's own vital climate goals which are rendering them uneconomic.

The challenge of "just transition" is a challenge of government.

It requires a strong nation-wide response, led by the Federal Government.

It is difficult to overstate the scale of the transformation we are talking about here.

The first Industrial Revolution took about a century and a half—give or take—to replace whale oil lamps with transmitted electricity as the primary means of illuminating our homes. The Renewable Revolution, by contrast, has only three decades to accomplish a similarly foundational transformation.

This is a specific and time critical challenge to which Australia is particularly vulnerable.

Our current economic dependence on fossil fuels is almost unique among developed countries.

Our economic complexity, on the other hand, ranks incredibly low, coming in at 91st in the world—tied with Namibia and just below Laos. Without a strong policy in place to keep energy workers and communities whole while diversifying their sources of prosperity, the bottom is going to drop out of large swaths of the Australian economy—and that will have real, human consequences.

Workers understand this, their families and communities understand this, business understand this, investors understand this.

In the years between 2013 and 2020, we saw 11 coal-fired power plants close, with an average notice time of just four months.

At least seven more are due for closure between now and 2030.

The situation is urgent and it's only going to get more so.

That's why the ACTU and our affiliate unions are being joined by business, investors and climate organisations in calling for the establishment of a National Energy Transition Authority in this year's budget.

At the climate summit in Egypt last November, Australia signed the United Nations Just Transition Declaration, a commitment to ensuring workers and communities are supported through the transition to clean energy. This was a welcome change from the position of the last Government.

We have seen the Albanese Government take other significant steps to address climate change in the 10 months since their election.

And we welcome yesterday's safeguard mechanism announcement of an agreement between the Government and the Greens. This legislation is too important to not urgently pass.

But we still have no federal just transition policy.

We still have a patchwork of uncoordinated programs and funding streams whose remit only incidentally overlaps with the goals of the Just Transition Declaration.

This means confusion for workers, and lack of real planning for change. Their workplace closes down and they are left stranded without the support they need to find a new secure job. Or they see a looming date for closure and have no certainty about if there will be a job or a future for them in their communities.

At present, workers don't even know where to go to get trained for the jobs in renewable industries they keep hearing about.

And without a well-funded, long-term plan for economic diversification, the regions struggle to bring in these new industries anyway.

This means potential investors and companies have no certainty regarding how they should—or even could—play their part in a genuinely just transition.

Coordination is urgently needed across multiple government departments and agencies working on the energy transition.

Right now, we have duplication and diffused responsibility.

We need to ensure federal resources are being mobilised effectively and efficiently under a shared plan.

Coordination must also involve state and local governments, many of whom have already stepped up in the absence of federal leadership to begin planning for the transition.

And coordination cannot exclude Traditional Owners. The voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must inform the transition process from its inception, not as an afterthought. For too long, First Nations people have been largely left out of the jobs and prosperity created by energy industries developed on their country—and not always with their consent.

The clean energy transition presents an opportunity to finally get it right, and ensure they have a real path to well-paid, secure, jobs in new renewable industries.

If this coordination doesn't happen—if “just transition” exists only as a proforma tick a box across a siloed scattering of agencies and companies—you can guarantee our transition won't be just.

It will only be truly just if it is somebody's job to **make** it just.

That is why what's needed is an Authority with real regulatory power that guarantees everyone plays their part under a coordinated plan – a plan with investments and jobs people can see – so that fear of the future turns into optimism.

This planning and its implementation has to be entrenched over the coming 3 decades. We can't risk this getting derailed by a future hostile government. That's why we're calling for an Authority with dedicated funding and a long-term, independent mandate—to make absolutely sure that the fate of Australian energy workers doesn't rest on the political tides of Canberra.

We know that cross-sectoral leadership is essential for providing direction, cohesion and buy-in. That's why we're advocating for an Authority with tripartite governance that includes unions, industry, and government.

It's worth saying that even if that Authority were established tomorrow, it would still come too late for the community of Muswellbrook, NSW and the workers at their local Liddell Power Station, which will close its doors on April 28th, exactly a month from today.

But if the government heeds the urgency, and establishes an independent, statutory Energy Transition Authority in this year's budget, then it won't be too late for the workers at the Eraring Power Station, which will close in 2025, or the Collie Power Station, which will close in 2027, or the Yallourn and Callide B power stations, which will close the following year—provided, of course, that those closure dates aren't moved up even further.

And it's not just the workers at the power stations we're talking about. It's all the workers who build and sustain these communities—the nurses, the teachers, the public servants, those in small businesses—many of them partners to the workers in the power stations. Their jobs and futures are on the line here too. They want to see a strong future for the communities they carry on their shoulders.

Practically this means:

- ample notice of closures, with time to plan;
- planned and organised pooled redeployment and redundancy schemes – where workers are able to transfer to similar facilities, and workers are offered voluntary retirement to create space for the workers wanting to be redeployed;

- support to assist workers to enrol in well-funded training courses that will build on their expertise in energy and prepare them for quality jobs in offshore wind or lithium processing or other renewable industries.
- jobs in new and diverse local industry are driven by private investment and government incentives made possible through the existence of a credible, long-term plan developed locally by workers, industry, government, and community—with the financial and technical support of the National Energy Transition Authority.

How will an Energy Transition Authority do this for workers and communities?

First, it needs to support the workers at fossil fuel facilities that will phase down in the transition to a net zero carbon future. That means individualised labour adjustment packages to guarantee workers affected by the transition have access to quality, secure, and safe jobs. These should include industry-wide pooled redundancy and redeployment schemes, education and training opportunities, income replacement and relocation packages where necessary, and early retirement packages where voluntary and appropriate.

The federal government has concluded rightly that it can't just rely on high-carbon industries to reduce their emissions at the pace required by climate science. That is why we needed legislation.

Likewise, we cannot rely on these industries to simply do the right thing by their workers when a facility is closing down. The Authority has to make sure employers are doing their fair share—not just turning their back after doling out the bare minimum redundancy payments.

Back in 2017, workers and the community of the La Trobe Valley had less than 6-months notice that the Hazelwood Power Plant was shutting down. Richard Clark was one of those workers, and he's here with us today. A proud delegate of the Mining and Energy Union when he first started working at Hazelwood at the age of 24, the company told anyone who would listen that they'd be open till 2025 and beyond. So when the snap closure was announced, there was very little support in place.

There was only a modest retraining budget and workers were essentially told to find a new career, and fast. Of the 150 operators Richard worked with at Hazelwood, he was one of only 18 who made it across to positions in the nearby Loy Yang power plant.

Without a clear economic future, people stopped investing in this community: businesses closed up shop and families with roots in this community were suddenly forced to leave town.

When Richard started at his new job at Loy Yang, the public closure date was 2048. It's since been moved forward to 2035. When Richard goes through his second power plant closure, he'll be a highly skilled 45 year old, in the prime of his working life.

An Energy Transition Authority will give him access to redeployment and retraining opportunities, income support if needed, and guarantee a bridge to another secure job. It will make sure that he and his fellow workers at Loy Yang enjoy the peace of mind that their comrades at Hazelwood never could.

The second function of an Energy Transition Authority would be to support, coordinate, and help fund robust economic diversification plans for regions transitioning away from fossil fuel industries. That includes leveraging federal and state incentives and investments to drive new renewable infrastructure into those regions—whether a factory manufacturing batteries, an electrolyser producing green hydrogen, or a processing plant refining Australian cobalt for export.

In the absence of federal leadership, local and state governments, unions, and community members have stepped up to start doing the hard work of transition planning.

The point is not for the National Transition Authority to supplant this work, but support it: by providing dedicated funding to turn plans into reality; by coordinating existing federal incentives and programs to back them in; by conducting analyses of feasibility and comparative advantage only possible at the national level; and by compelling participation from all of the key players, including industry.

Transition planning will not work if local people aren't the ones driving it. People on the ground are best positioned to envision their region's future—and in many cases have already mapped it out in great detail. The National Authority can learn from what works on the ground, and share that across regions, so that no one is reinventing the wheel.

We're lucky enough to be joined today by Daniel Graham, a rigger scaffolder at Muja Power Station in Collie, Western Australia. It's his 39th birthday tomorrow, and he still chose to come all the way out from WA because he knows how important this is.

Dan is Collie born and bred, president of the local footy club, comes from a long line of coal workers. His father helped construct the power station where he now works. His grandfather was a proud coal miner. If you drive through Collie, you'll see the mural of his Grandfather painted in the centre of town, standing with the old horse and cart they used to use to carry coal up from the mines.

The Graham family legacy runs deep in the industry and the community.

Dan has been a leader in planning what comes next for Collie, after coal disappears. As a delegate with the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union, he leads conversations in his workplace with people just like him, workers who are worried about their future and the future of their town.

Through his union, he also helps steer the Collie Just Transition Working Group, which has been doing detailed planning to envision what that diversified economy will look like and what the jobs of the future will be, what training support is needed for workers transitioning out of coal, and how we can use the existing strengths of a highly skilled local workforce to develop new green industries.

A National Energy Transition Authority would support local leaders like Dan, providing funding, coordination, and expertise to back in their plans for jobs, training, community regeneration, and help make them a reality.

The third core function is education and training. An Energy Transition Authority would make sure that the infrastructure is in place to prepare the workforce in these regions to have good quality jobs in the newly diversified sustainable economy. That means both education—like fully-resourced, fit-to-purpose TAFE and university courses—and infrastructure, like workforce training centres, or strategic expansions of regional universities.

In Germany's Ruhr Valley, these resources were developed early, so that coal miners could begin retraining well before they were out of a job.

We need to prepare the Australian workforce as a whole to drive the net zero transition and thrive in the net zero economy—and we should start that work in the regions where the current energy jobs have an end date.

Bella Todd has come down today from Wollongong because this issue is personal for her. Bella is the daughter of seven generations of coal miners. Her grandfather was a coal miner who started working in the mines at age 16. He spent decades in the industry, lost three of his fingers to a workplace accident. Her father too was a coal miner, working in Lithgow and then the Illawara. Bella grew up in one of the old miner's cottages you can still find dotted across the back streets of Wollongong.

She's 24 years old and proud of her family's history. She is also a climate activist with the youth-led Tomorrow Movement, fighting for her generation's future on a habitable planet, and her city's future in a clean energy economy.

Bella understands that Wollongong could become a renewable powerhouse, with offshore wind farms powering green steel plants producing the raw material for everything from electric vehicles to turbine blades.

But she also knows that vision won't come to pass unless the young people of Wollongong have a genuine path into good, secure, unionised jobs in those industries. By coming here today to call for a National Energy Transition Authority, she is continuing the legacy of her father and her grandfather, fighting for workers and standing up for her hometown.

In all three of these key functions, the Energy Transition Authority should begin with a focus on those regions reliant on coal-fired power generation, an industry that is phasing down rapidly and is predicted to disappear by 2035. Then it should expand its remit as other high-carbon industries are impacted.

Our transition planning must be proactive, not reactive.

The Transition Authority should be planning for the next cab off the rank well before its actually left.

What we're talking about here today is a vital missing piece in our climate and energy policy landscape.

Establishing an Energy Transition Authority is about charting a path between denialism on the one hand and utopianism on the other.

It's about recognising what's coming, rolling up our sleeves, and doing the work to build the country we deserve.

This is human climate policy: climate policy meant for real people today in brick and mortar communities— and their kids and grandkids.

It's about moving beyond a model which surrenders Australian families to the whims of the market.

We know this is the role government can and must play because we've seen it happen firsthand.

When the COVID-19 crisis put millions of Australians out of work and upended whole industries, the government stepped in to keep families and communities whole. A \$130 billion stimulus package—including a six month wage subsidy—was passed through Parliament in a single sitting day, the first of many crucial interventions that saved lives and fortified our economy.

Climate change and the energy transition pose a very different kind of challenge, but the fundamentals are familiar: big change is coming fast, jobs and families are at risk, industries are being transformed, and the market alone cannot fix it.

But this is not just about containing the fallout: there is a huge amount to be gained—in jobs, in prosperity, in climate security—if the Government steps into the breach.

And we don't need to take any of this on faith: we are seeing it play out live, right now, in countries around the world.

Take Germany.

Their transition away from the coal mining industry—which in the late 1970s employed over 600,000 workers—has been a remarkable success story. Over several decades, they have combined long-term planning and economic diversification with comprehensive worker support and real engagement with unions and communities. In 2018, these policies crystallized in the formation of an independent, tripartite national Coal Commission, tasked with ensuring a just transition for Germany's coal regions, an effort that has received €40 billion euros in funding.

The result? Over six decades of steady decline, the coal industry has not experienced a single forced redundancy, and the traditional coal regions are transforming from single industry into genuinely diversified economies.

Or look at Spain. In 2019, the Spanish government launched a Just Transition Strategy to maximise the benefits and minimise the risks of the energy transition in their country's coal regions. The Strategy guarantees rapid-response economic support for workers and communities experiencing imminent closures of mines and power plants.

It also allocates long-term funding to a newly-established, independent Just Transition Institute that is tasked with the long haul work of ensuring a just transition. So far the Institute is supporting place-based, locally-driven transition plans in 15 separate regions, each developed with unions, industry, community, and government at the table.

Each of these agreements is receiving generous funding from the Spanish government to support workers, bring in new industries, improve local infrastructure, and retrain hundreds of coal workers in clean energy industries. This has already created 2,100 new jobs, and catalysed further private and E.U. investment expected to create another 11,000 jobs and nearly 2,000 new small and medium-sized businesses.

Both of these examples stand in stark contrast to what has happened in the United States. Look at West Virginia, a state with a proud history of unionised coal mining. For several decades, changing energy markets and growing efforts to limit emissions have led to a steady and predictable decline in the state's coal industry.

But rather than actually tackle the challenge, politicians like Donald Trump lied through their teeth, insisting that coal was never going away. "The coal industry is back" he proclaimed at a 2018 rally in West Virginia. It wasn't true. It was gutless pandering, plain and simple. Meanwhile, Trump and his allies worked with the coal bosses to torpedo any just transition policies that would have actually supported workers and built new jobs and industries.

The results have been devastating: with no bridge to a clean energy future, West Virginia has been thrown into a spiral of generational poverty and social upheaval. It is now the second poorest state in the country. The high rates of unemployment, poor health, and depression have proved fertile ground for the opioid epidemic, which is now dragging down the average American lifespan to levels not seen in 25 years. With no just transition policy in place, the bottom fell out of the state's economy, and what might have been a renaissance quickly turned into a tragedy.

That tragedy provoked a predictable backlash. The experience of the energy transition has been deeply chaotic and unjust for the people of West Virginia. So it's not surprising that many of them have come to distrust politicians, bosses and the energy transition itself.

The right wing opportunists whose lies caused that suffering have now eagerly enflamed it into yet another front in their climate wars.

There's been a lot of talk here in Canberra about America's breakthrough \$379 billion climate legislation, the Inflation Reduction Act. There's been far less attention paid to the fact that it came within a hair's breadth of not passing. The key holdout vote was the Senator from West Virginia, who held up the bill for nearly a full year, and declared it dead three times over out of fear of his coal baron donors and the backlash politics they'd unleashed.

It took the intervention of the United Mine Workers union to help finally get him on board, passing the legislation with no votes to spare in the final week of the legislative session.

The lesson for Australia is clear: major structural adjustment just works better when it is planned and coordinated by government—and informed by the voices of workers and communities. The hands-off, half-assed approach risks a disaster: for people, for economies, and for the pace of climate progress.

That's probably why the call for an Energy Transition Authority here in Australia has garnered support not just from across the union movement, but from leading organisations across the climate, investor, industry, and regional development sectors.

Everyone in this big tent understands what's at stake. Net zero by 2050 is a huge job with a long arc.

If the government wants to maintain its social license, it needs to uphold the social contract. And that means leaving no worker or community behind.

Of course, here in Australia, we have our own Trumps. Politicians like Matt Canavan are more than happy to dress up and use coal workers as political props before hanging them out to dry. He thinks he can condescend to them because in his mind they're just mugs.

But what I know is that Australian energy workers are some of the most sophisticated, knowledgeable workers in our economy. They know our energy grid better than almost anyone else—because they're the ones that keep it running day-in and day-out. They are the experts. And they know more about what is happening to their industry globally than any politician I've ever met. Leaving them behind in the transition wouldn't just be a moral failure but a massive missed opportunity.

We need their expertise and then some, because we have so much work to do. Not only to transition to net zero but to realise Australia's potential as a renewable energy superpower.

Two weeks ago, the ACTU along with the Business Council of Australia, the Australian Conservation Foundation, and the World Wild Fund for Nature released an update to our 2021 Sunshot report, highlighting the opportunity to create 400,000 jobs and over \$100 billion gross value add through the development of key renewable export industries.

400,000 jobs and \$100 Billion dollars.

We're talking about industries that will contribute *more* jobs and *more* value to the Australian economy than the current fossil fuel sector. Things like critical minerals mining and processing, green metals, green hydrogen, and battery manufacture. The report underscored the need for the government to move fast and invest big, or risk getting squeezed out of the newly accelerating global race for green jobs, green capital, and green supply chains. If Australia rises to that challenge, we are going to generate huge numbers of new jobs.

The question is: what kinds of jobs will they be?

Will they be stable, well paid, secure jobs? I'm talking about the kind you can raise a family on, the kind you can buy a house with, the kind that will allow you, after decades of hard work, to retire with dignity. Or will they be insecure, exploited jobs? The kind that keeps you up at night, wondering when your next shift's going to come, wondering whether you'll be able to pay the rent or ever take your kids on a holiday.

There is only one viable answer to that question. If the energy transition doesn't generate genuinely good quality, secure jobs, then it will fail on two fronts. It will fail first, because no region is going to agree to replace unionised careers in coal with backpacker wages in solar. The social license just won't be there.

And it will fail second, because bad jobs make Australians more vulnerable to climate change. If your family is already struggling to make ends meet, if you don't have any savings, then the financial impact of something like a flood, or a bushfire, is going to be more devastating, and harder to recover from. Australia needs workers in secure jobs in order to weather this storm. If industry responds to climate change by shafting workers, then they will undermine all our efforts.

We cannot allow that to happen. It's up to us to imagine and then build a different future for Australia's energy regions. A future where communities can build on their strengths and determine their own fate.

A future where a way of life is preserved through dedication to a new purpose: nothing less than safeguarding life on a habitable planet.

I understand the cynicism in some of these communities. People talk at them, not with them. Promises are easily dished out but rarely delivered.

They deserve a future they can see and believe in. They deserve a sturdy bridge they can walk over to reach that future, one they can trust will hold them and their families.

This budget is a chance for Labor to build that bridge, and distinguish itself clearly from the last ten years of delay and dereliction.

Ten years of holding our future hostage by turning climate change into a culture war.

The scars of the climate policy culture war in Australia has left the current Albanese Government with a critically urgent and pressing job.

The National Energy Transition Authority is essential to getting that job done.

Getting it done fairly.

Getting it done with worker and public support.

We have no choice but to reach net zero.

But instead of fear and political arguments – we must act - and act quickly and confidently.

Achieving the de-carbonisation of our economy is a nation-building, history-making, generation-defining project.

Only the levers and leadership of the Federal Government can make this happen.

There is no time to waste.