

Canberra – January 28

Sharan Burrow, ACTU President

Leaders Forum Opening Remarks

Introduction

2008 is a year for the Australian people.

- Rights at work will be reinstated;
- Childcare provision is to be expanded and new work & family rights to be legislated;
- Education and training are again on the political agenda in a substantial way;
- Skills, industry policy, R&D, innovation and infrastructure are appropriately seen to be drivers of jobs, growth and economic sustainability;
- Housing affordability, health, aged care and homelessness are out of the shadows;
- Climate change and national and international effort are recognized as urgent;
- Troops will be brought home from Iraq;

And, importantly, the opportunity is now there for further progress to be discussed and planned for in important areas where unions want to see major improvements. These must include superannuation, paid maternity leave, OH&S, migration, transport, reconciliation and human rights.

We campaigned for this and Australians voted for it.

These areas of key public policy amongst others represent the vision of a decent Australia.

We look forward to working with Kevin Rudd and the various Government ministers, both independently and in alliance with other community groups to rebuild the damage to work, opportunity and care inflicted on our social fabric by the Howard years during which the federal government lost touch with the nation.

Success of the Your Rights at Work Campaign

Last November Australians voted for a future where they could see themselves and their families with rights at work.

They overwhelmingly rejected Work Choices with eight out of ten people who voted Labor stating that this was a key factor in their vote.

You and your members played a huge role in shaping the conversation in our communities that led to this decision by Australians.

You feel proud of the *Your Rights at Work Campaign* and so you should.

You stood up to a government determined to smash the fundamental right to freedom of association, to decimate the right to organize and collectively bargain and to abandon protection from discrimination to the market with all power to employers; the most anti-union government in our history.

We know how hard everyone worked to defend the rights of union members affected by Work Choices and to champion the cause of working Australians wherever they were exploited by the Liberals' laws.

Over the election period our volunteer community campaigners door-knocked and spoke to 39,000 people in marginal Coalition electorates about voting to protect their rights at work.

On election day nearly 5,000 volunteers joined the YRAW campaign to hand out information at polling booths.

And I can proudly report that in the seats targeted by unions the swing against the Coalition was on average 2.5% higher than the average.

This was truly a great achievement.

You will recall that we made two promises to those courageous Australians who turned out for the community protest of November 15, 2006.

We said we would not stand back and allow a legacy to be handed to our children and grandchildren that left them fewer rights at work than we had, fewer rights than those fought for and achieved by our parents and grandparents. And we said that in order to guarantee this we would build a movement for change.

Working Australians and their unions did this in partnership with the community and this is the year we will see it through.

Challenges we now face

The ACTU leaders forum is now the opportunity for unions to discuss how we protect workers rights in the aftermath of Work Choices and for the next decade.

This will necessitate the core business of recruiting and organizing union members. It will require us to act locally and globally in the face of the power of multi-national companies and their treatment of workers down through their supply chains, it will involve an ongoing conversation with our communities and it will require us to listen to and develop a forward agenda for advocacy on behalf of working Australians and their families.

This forum allows us the opportunity to collectively plan to get on with the job.

Undoing the damage of Work Choices and restoring workers' rights

The spotlight will continue to be put on the Coalition and those Senators who fail to respect the vote of the Australian public and who seek to oppose new legislation.

Rights at work campaigners will continue the dialogue with their communities and in particular the constituencies of any Senator who seeks to cling to the exploitative set of laws implemented by John Howard.

The ALP transition bill will abolish AWA's and set the machinery in place for the process of award modernization that will again see that great Australian tradition of an award guarantee, now with minimum legislative standards, set the floor of dignity for all workers in every workplace.

However this will not overnight undo the damage caused by Work Choices. The development of the "Substantive Bill" will be undertaken throughout the first half of 2008. Our priority will be to see unfair dismissal rights reinstated and to ensure that the architecture for collective bargaining is put in place. This will ensure fairer workplaces and underpin growth.

Collective bargaining coverage is directly related to equity. Where collective bargaining coverage is low - inequity is high. The example of the US is startling with collective bargaining coverage falling to just 7% in the private sector and inequity at an all time high.

Wages relative to growth in profits have steadily fallen in real terms for three decades and we are all set to suffer the global economic fallout from the US -- a large and leading nation where many working families already can't afford to pay their bills and stand to be even more badly affected if the current downturn worsens.

We have seen the beginning but not the end here of the fallout from the US with the greed of the banks offsetting their profit risk and raising interest rates just a few weeks ago. More broadly the export of the US corporate model is showing up everywhere with similar trends in regard to both opposition to collective bargaining and real wage decline relative to obscene profit growth.

This challenge has been the discussion internationally with the Global Council of Unions, meeting in early January, committed to global organizing in strategic industry sectors and global action. Global action will include in this the 60th anniversary year of the Declaration of Human Rights and the right to freedom of association, a world day of action on October 10th for decent work; for rights at work everywhere.

These three days allow for consolidation of national priorities and Jeff will lead you in the discussion.

Creating a fairer and more prosperous Australia

The ACTU and the unions have always prided ourselves on an independent voice in both defending and advancing wages and conditions and in improving critical areas of the social wage that support all Australians. Guaranteed public services, support for families and a fair welfare system that encourages people into work and supports them where this is not possible is the basis of a decent Australia. We will continue to do this and beyond the immediate priorities will also establish a mechanism to consult you on a longer term agenda.

Unions also have an important economic role in advancing key measures to generate sustainable growth.

This begins in a decent nation with a fair minimum wage – a wage on which people can live and anticipate in the economic life of the nation. It includes the guarantee of an award and legislative safety net and support for collective bargaining rights.

Women must not be left behind and the legacy of the fall in average weekly earners for full time women workers from 87c in the male dollar to 84c in just two and a half years under Work Choices is a national disgrace.

We will work with Government, business and the community for the twin objectives of economic prosperity and social inclusion. And we look forward to a genuine discussion on productivity that is centered on skills, participation, innovation and the nature of work and not on the low wage, longer hours exploitation of the Howard years.

We recognize that the economic context in which Australia finds itself cannot be decoupled from global trends just as the reality for working families that are struggling to keep their heads above water cannot be lost in macro economic strategy.

I have already stressed the issue of the relative decline of wages to profit share but remind our broader audiences that this trend has increasingly pushed families' credit dependence to record highs with the risks of both political instability and serious economic fracture now becoming reality. The sub-prime crisis in the US began because poorer working families could not pay their mortgages. This crisis is in fact less than a third of the way through as mortgages are due to be reset in the coming months and more families go to the wall.

Australia has been lucky with a resources boom but in a two tiered economy where for too many the Howard years meant rising housing prices, increasing interest rates and price hikes in petrol, food, childcare and other expenses with a constraint in wages that in combination saw a record number of mortgage defaults just last year, it is far from rosy.

Caught with inflationary pressures which are threat to real wages we would nevertheless urge caution about further raises in interest rates when families are overburdened with credit and the US impact is yet to wash through with its dampening effect on our economy. An early indicator of this is the worrying significant downward revision of the IMF's forecast for world employment growth. Rather than focus the pain on working Australians and their families lets genuinely consider rebalancing of the distribution of growth.

Governments must also ensure sustainability of growth and equity for the long term and not just try to deliver short term stability. Again, these measures must include the provision of a strong social safety net of income protection and respect for collective bargaining and a decent floor of wages and conditions for working poeple.

One thing I know is that workers and their families cannot afford cuts in real wages and neither can business and the economy risk the negative impact of families without discretionary income or worse families who simply cannot pay their bills and face economic devastation.

Unions cannot and will not allow low and middle income working Australians to suffer cuts to the real value of their wages.

While we stand willing to work constructively with a business world that accepts the principles of decent work as accepted by the UN; work that is underpinned by rights, it goes without saying that we will not stand by and let those companies who refuse to accept the decision of the Australian people on November 24th continue to use Work Choices and AWAs to exploit their workers.

You will discuss the commitment of the unions collectively to maintain the rights at work campaign to tackle companies like Telstra, once a great icon, now a company sadly mired in the ugly American corporate model.

Conclusion

In conclusion let me reiterate these points.

Australian unions and the ACTU will continue to stand up and fight for the rights of working people;

We are proud of our role as the voice of working Australians and their families and unions will stand in alliance with our communities for industrial and social improvement for all;

The ACTU stands ready to work constructively to develop a new narrative on which to build a prosperous, inclusive and sustainable future for all Australians.

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