



AUSTRALIAN UNIONS AND THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION

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FOREIGN PRESS ASSOCIATION SPEECH

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Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you very much for inviting me back to speak to the Foreign Correspondents' Association.

It is nearly a year since I last spoke at this forum.

At that time, I promised I would come back to speak at least once a year.

I have kept that promise.

I am keeping it because I think that this is a very important platform to speak, through you, to a wider world community.

I stress 'world community' because this country is increasingly becoming part of this wider community - with a special focus on the Asia-Pacific.

At the end of the 20th century a relatively small country like Australia can no longer expect to live in splendid isolation - expecting the blue waters surrounding our island to keep us safely ignorant about the rest of the world and its goings-on.

Today the world market is predominant - and it can have a drastic impact on our way of life.

Just look at the recession we are now struggling to get out of!

Here in Australia - and around the world - there is widespread debate about exactly how we will get out of the recession.

Australia won't be able to do it completely by herself.

But Australians, earlier this year, quite correctly, rejected the Hewson solution to the recession.

That solution was closely modelled on the Reagan/Thatcher view of the world.

It is a view which has, thankfully, been rejected recently in the USA with the election of President Clinton.

And now, in the debates in EC forums, it is gradually being rejected right across Europe.

The Hewson model would have led to some high social costs for Australians.

The stark evidence of these 'costs' can be seen both in the UK and the USA.

The widespread poverty;

The delinquency;

The shocking crime rates;

The urban decay;

and the impoverished community health systems.

Now I have said the key to us climbing out of the recession is the world economy, so it is heartening to see that President Clinton recently announced that he is planning a world summit on unemployment.

In a speech in San Francisco - on the way to the Tokyo economic summit earlier this month - President Clinton expressed his frustration that no matter what his government seemed to do to improve the economy the jobs were just not being created.

" This is a global crisis," the President declared before he met the G-7 leaders earlier this month.

" Wealthy countries, even when they become more productive, are having trouble creating new jobs," Mr Clinton said.

Now I am convinced that for Australia to create new jobs; for Australia to maintain and improve living standards; the Australian economy must become more export oriented, especially in the high value added manufacturing and services sectors.

We cannot go back to our old protectionist ways.

That would be totally crazy and counter-productive.

But that also means that President Clinton's talk of some type of world summit on unemployment is a crucial event for this country.

ACTU research shows that here in Australia the Accord will deliver a minimum of 500,000 additional jobs over the next three years.

We are convinced that that is achievable.

And, provided recovery proceeds in the rest of the industrialised world, it is likely to be exceeded.

But even with that increase, Australian unemployment rates could remain stuck at what is for working people - the people I represent - an unacceptably high rate.

Our essential task must therefore be to secure stronger employment growth.

But, for a relatively small economy like Australia's, job growth will in large part depend on how well we can integrate with the Asia-Pacific and the rest of the world.

And of course President Clinton's unemployment summit should deliver a new burst of international economic growth.

Ladies and Gentlemen. Members of the Foreign Press corps.

Of particular importance for Australia's job growth hopes will be our service industry development, especially in areas such as tourism, banking, computer software, health and higher education.

In a very short while I expect that manufacturing and services will not only supplement but overtake, our traditional export earnings based on commodities.

In many ways though, Australia is very lucky because we are well placed to build an important base for the service industries in the Asia-Pacific region .

We clearly have good conditions for international investment in the service industries.

We have a well-educated, skilled, English speaking workforce - a good part of our workforce can also speak one or more of the languages of this region.

And all of this is based in a stable, democratic society where, while the cost of living is low, the general standard of living is high.

We are also part of the Asia-Pacific rim which has quite clearly become the engine room of the world's economic growth in the last decade.

Australia's trade figures show that we are substantially integrated into this region.

Already seven of Australia's top ten customers are in Asia.

More than fifty per cent of our total exports are into the Asian region.

Ladies and Gentlemen. Members of the Foreign Press corps.

The world market that is now predominant has, of course, important implications for the working people that I represent in this country .

But it also has important ramifications for the working people of this region and right around the globe.

This international economic integration may have very little respect for local industrial relations norms.

As just one small example:

The human resources policies of the Sheraton Hotels chain in this country  
- a chain with which our union movement has relatively positive relations  
- is set not in Australia.

Their IR policies are established in Hong Kong.

The reverse of course sometimes happens:

The National Australia Bank establishes the parameters of the human resources policies of The National Bank of Ireland here in Australia - at their Melbourne HQ.

While some Australian economists may argue that the creation of the world market - and more especially the economic growth of the Asia-Pacific region - is an exciting prospect it is important for union people to ask the question: For whom?

After all it is only good if it raises the living standards of all working women and men.

If it favours only the few it is a trend that I cannot wholeheartedly cheer and support.

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions - the ICFTU based in Brussels - and to which the ACTU is affiliated - noted way back in 1948:

" The 'trickle down' theory of trade policy does not work. There are no automatic mechanisms by which increased exports lead to improved wages and conditions....

Increased exports do provide the resources for improvements but only trade unions through collective bargaining or governments through adequately enforced labour laws can ensure that increased trade does really lead to higher standards of living."

Now that is a view to which I can wholeheartedly subscribe to !!!

While the countries of this region are growing - sometimes exponentially - the potential positive effects of that growth will only be felt by working people if they can organise themselves into independent and representative trade unions.

Because the Australian economy is becoming internationalised we in the Australian union movement must take greater cognisance of these questions and provide appropriate support to our sisters and brothers around the world.

But recognising our limited resources the ACTU recently decided to prioritise our union relationships in the Asia-Pacific region.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Before I go on I want to make it very clear that we recognise that despite the emerging economic integration of this region, there is a great diversity amongst the nations of the Asia-Pacific.



The ACTU believes that we must respect each nation's different cultures, traditions, history and values.

There is no way that the ACTU would ever attempt to impose or translate our Australian practices, cultures etc. to nations in this region.

Having said that, the ACTU is part of the international workers' movement and will give support through international organisations, like the ICFTU and the International Labor Organisation, or through bilateral links with representative national union bodies.

We must help ensure that the imperatives of rapid development and industrialisation are not used as the pretext and justification for serious violation of trade union rights and blatant exploitation of workers.

The terrible tragedy of the Kader Toy Factory in Bangkok that burnt down just a little over two months ago - killing 188 and seriously injuring some 500 other workers, almost all women - reminds us that there is a real role for independent and representative trade unions in this region.

The Kader Toy Factory had had two other outbreaks of fire in the recent past and had done nothing - it shows the utter disregard for the lives of employees.

I venture to suggest that strong, independent and representative unions could do a lot to protect the lives of Bangkok's working people.

While I again affirm that I do not believe that it is the role of the ACTU to impose conditions on other countries we as a member of the international workers' movement do have obligations to support the rights of workers to join unions and fight for improved labour standards.

It is important to remember that labour standards in certain cases must be universal and cross national and cultural barriers.

For example international standards must be applied if a certain chemical is dangerous when not handled appropriately.

Safety standards are not there just to protect the workers of developed countries such as Australia or the USA - just because they have strong and well-organised unions.

If American and Australian workers are threatened by chemical X so are Thai, Indonesian, Fijian or West Samoan workers.

Defending and improving occupational health and safety standards is considered by most Australian workers as one of the most important services that our unions provide.

First rate delivery of these services will continue to be a high priority in Australia but I believe this is a service we can appropriately export into our region.

Already we are talking with the ILO about different ways our people can help upgrade OHS standards by supporting ILO OHS technical co-operation programs in this region.

At the recent ILO conference important decisions were taken on developing an international Convention on OHS standards.

The committee developing the Convention was chaired by a top Indonesian government official, with the deputy chair coming from the ACTU.

After the conference the ACTU was approached informally by the Indonesians to see if we would send one of our OHS people to work with the Indonesian Department of Labour's people to further develop this important question for their workers.

I am more than happy to work in this consensual manner on this important matter so that we can help to provide to workers in our region the OHS benefits Australian workers already have - thanks to their trade unions.

As I said before we have recently decided to prioritise our international work.

In the Asian region we will be paying particular attention to our relationships with unions and workers in South Korea, Vietnam, China/Taiwan/Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Japan will continue to be a major focus in the development of our regional relationships.

And, because of Australia's involvement in Cambodia, it is likely that we will receive requests for assistance in supporting trade union development in that country.

Recently when Hyundai workers and their union leaders in the Republic of Korea were arrested for taking industrial action the ACTU joined an internationally co-ordinated protest to the government in Seoul.

The ACTU wrote to the President of the Republic of Korea protesting that an arrest warrant has been issued for Mr Dan Byung-ho, the President of the Korea Trade Union Congress and other union leaders.

Mr Dan is currently in hiding. The government of Korea has already imprisoned him twice before thus the KTUC Executive has ordered him underground.

On behalf of the ACTU I have protested to President Kim, noting that one strength of an open and democratic government is the willingness to permit the organisation and activities of a freely elected union movement.

I have already indicated some of the work we are doing in the Asian region - in Indonesia, Thailand and Korea.

Here are just some of the other things we are, or I expect will be, doing in the near future:

- \* working with AUSTRADE to assess the role of the Australian trade union movement in actively promoting trade and investment linkages in Asia
- \* promoting links between unions working in the same company in this region to assess the degree to which those companies are complying with ILO standards
- \* running with TUTA, the ILO and the ICFTU a series of leadership courses for Asia-Pacific unionists
- \* training courses for the Malaysian Nurses Association
- \* workshops on conciliation and arbitration skills in the Solomon Islands
- \* training programs in Vietnam and the Philippines conducted by APHEDA - the ACTU's overseas development arm.
- \* sending ACTU delegations to Vietnam and Indonesia to study how we can further work with unions - and appropriate government and non-government organisations ... particularly those concerned with women workers.

In addition of course some of our unions are undertaking direct international links

For example the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union is involved helping the Vietnamese building union training officials and delegates for the new evolving mixed economy.

In the Pacific region our limited resources are concentrated largely on support of the South Pacific and Oceanic Council of Trade Unions (SPOCTU).

SPOCTU is a regional subset of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions to which we belong and, since SPOCTU's creation in 1990, has played an important and increasingly respected role in this region.

Last week I - and more than 80 other regional and international delegates - was due to go to Vanuatu for the triennial conference of SPOCTU, which represents national union groupings in 14 countries in the South Pacific.

Unfortunately, at the last minute, the Vanuatu government declared as 'undesirable' the SPOCTU Executive Officer, Rod Ellis, and SPOCTU's Education Officer, Raghwa

No official explanation was given for declaring these two key union people - based in Brisbane - undesirable people.

SPOCTU immediately cancelled the whole conference.

It not only hurt SPOCTU's finances but it would also have been a significant loss for the local business community in Vanuatu.



This restriction on the free movement of the region's citizens, and particularly the executive personnel of a legitimate non-governmental organisation has already been roundly condemned as totally unacceptable and intolerable.

I understand the unions of the South Pacific region are asking for an urgent meeting with Vanuatu Government officials for an explanation and apology.

SPOCTU has always sought to work in an open, free, democratic and consensual manner.

In recent times its key role has been to lobby the South Pacific Forum to seek equal 'observer status' with private sector employers at their meetings.

SPOCTU wants the South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Co-operation Agreement (SPARTECA) - administered by a sub-committee of the South Pacific Forum - to include a clause saying that island exporters receiving concessions from SPARTECA must recognise the unions representing their workers, and adopt acceptable industrial relations policies.

What SPOCTU is seeking with SPARTECA is part of a general strategy of the international workers' movement.

The ICFTU is currently speaking to the GATT Council about the creation of a Working Group on Workers Rights and Trade.

The ICFTU is working towards a 'social clause' - ensuring the right to free independent trade unions and certain established job standards - will be written into trade agreements such as GATT or the new General Agreement on Trade in Services.

And the international workers' movement also wants to see the issue of worker rights included in the policies and programmes of the international financial institutions - the IMF and the World Bank.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Now I believe that all of the work I have outlined fits into our overall stance on human rights - because the ACTU's policy is based on the following fundamental assumptions:

- \* the rights of working people are an integral dimension of human rights;

and

- \* human rights are essential in a society is to be able to boast that it is free, democratic and at peace with both its citizens and its neighbours.

The ACTU took an active role, as part of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, in the work leading up to last month's UN Conference on Human Rights in Vienna.

Our well respected International and Ethnic Liaison Officer, Alan Matheson, attended an international union conference on human rights in Vienna before the UN conference started.

Enzo Friso, the general secretary of the ICFTU, told this union conference that there were too many governments using the world economic recession to attack human rights as a hindrance to economic and social development.

The union conference was told there were two fundamental dilemmas confronting workers - more than a billion unemployed workers by the year 2000 and the increased migration - mostly illegal - of working people.

" Primitive capitalism," Enzo Friso said, " is now attacking human rights."

Greater attention needs to be given to Asia, Mr Friso said in a concluding comment.

Slogans such as "democracy does not help development," need to be challenged, the ICFTU general-secretary concluded.

All I can say is I concur.

The right to organise into unions, the right to freely demand higher pay, better working conditions and better living standards will be a key indicator of how real is the economic development that is occurring in any country.

When the workers of Eastern Europe went onto the streets demanding better conditions, that demand went hand-in-hand with the demand for freedom and the right to organise.

One cannot expect that the demand for more food and better housing can be separated from the demand for the right to organise, the right to democracy.

It is not just because of some ethical world-view that I hold as a union official, and as a democratic socialist, that I concur with Enzo Friso's statement.

It is not just about feel-good charity.

It is also a matter of self-interest.

Better pay and better living standards throughout Asia and the Pacific will create more demand for the quality goods that Australian union members now create.

And better pay, better living conditions and the freedom to organise throughout Asia and the Pacific will also hinder the worst elements among the employing classes.

It will hinder that group of employers who try to play off one worker from one country against another worker from another country when they constantly put pressure on our members to drop their labour cost demands - OR ELSE!!!

Let me say that sometimes regional Asia-Pacific labour ministers claim that this line of argument is only a rationalisation by unions from rich countries trying to stop jobs going to developing countries.

But we know that unscrupulous employers have used this game often enough to play off one group of workers in a developing country against another group of workers in another developing country.

Take a recent horrific example in our part of the Pacific.

An Australian textile company investing in the Cook Islands forced the complete collapse of that small country's textile industry when Fiji offered the Australian investor a tax holiday and no pesky unions.

In the Cook Islands the investor paid \$2.50 an hour. In Fiji it was 60 cents an hour, and a 12 year tax holiday!!

Ladies and Gentlemen.

I would like to return to the Vienna conference for a minute.

It was heartening to see that the ICFTU campaign to reaffirm trade union rights as a basic human right paid off.

The Vienna statement included a specific reference to trade union rights in the final document of the UN Conference on Human Rights.

Unfortunately we did not get everything we wanted.

No new mechanism for the improved monitoring of human and trade union rights was included in the final statement.

Nor was there any specific reference to the role of the ILO in the defence of human and trade union rights.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Because it is the International Year of the Indigenous Peoples, and because of the sometimes racist tone of the debate about Mabo, I want to conclude my talk here today by outlining the ACTU's views on Mabo and the Reconciliation process.

A few weeks ago the ACTU hosted the Partners for Justice conference of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unionists.

We brought together - over two days - people from right around Australia to discuss the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander union people.

The results of these talks will go to the ACTU Congress starting in a few weeks time.

Obviously Mabo and the reconciliation process was high on the agenda of the Partners for Justice conference.

Pat Dodson the Chair of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was a key speaker.

He will also speak to the ACTU Congress.

The ACTU strongly supports the reconciliation process and is proud to have one of our Assistant Secretaries, Jennie George, as a member of Pat Dodson's council.

On the question of Mabo.

The ACTU and our affiliates are involved in an information campaign among union members saying union people should not be fooled by the outrageously false claims being made about Mabo by some conservatives.

We ought not to fear Mabo.

Mabo is not about landrights claims on private land.

The suburban backyard is safe.

The farm is safe, and always will be safe.

Mabo is about giving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders the confidence that their land - land that they have had for thousands of years - is land that belongs to them.

Members of the Foreign Press Association thank you very much for taking time out to listen to me.

In a little over a month's time - from Monday August 30 to Friday September 3 - the ACTU will be holding its Congress here in Sydney, at Darling Harbour, where about 1000 union people from around Australia will be in attendance.

The Congress is our highest decision-making body.

I hope you will be able to attend - for at least part of the time - so that you can report on our deliberations to your important audience.

Thanks once more.