

ACTU Just Transition Conference

Thursday 10th November, 2016

Speech by Ged Kearney, ACTU President

[acknowledgement to country – both Wurundjurri and Ngunnawal – thank you everyone for coming etc]

We meet at a crucial time for the energy sector in this nation. The closure of Hazelwood is the sign that we are in a time of great upheaval and momentous changes. It is a time that reminds us that how we adapt to these changes is critical.

In 1986, I was a young nurse. When I joined the ranks of my profession, nurses were at breaking point. My colleagues were sick of being devalued and disrespected, of putting up with low pay and sub-standard conditions. The powers that be conspired to cut our pay and our career pathways.

Traditionally, nurses weren't the striking type. We were in it to care: and society, including many of us, really believed that to strike, to stand up, meant leaving our patients behind.

But we saw what the status quo was doing to our patients. We were stretched, understaffed and low pay, gendered pay, was grinding us down.

We had believed the story that it was us or the patients. That told us that our interests were opposed. The nurses were told that we were greedy and selfish for not sacrificing ourselves to care for patients. We experienced an endless barrage of sexist media and political attacks. We were told that it was *our* fault if patients weren't getting the care they needed: that it was up to us to bear the brunt of the government's decisions to not fund our healthcare system properly.

Increasingly, we began to reject that story. And I joined about 5000 other Victorian nurses in calling an indefinite strike. Our strike came after a decade of similar actions by nurses around the country – lots of voices in the darkness urging us to reject the story of division we had been told. Our strike lasted 50 days, which was a very long strike for the time. It was hard. Not everyone supported it at first. Many still believed the idea we were sold that standing up for ourselves and the dignity of our patients could only come at the cost to those patients.

But we fought hard. We told ourselves the new truth. We rejected a morality that divided our community. And we won.

The result was a radical transformation in the way that nurses are viewed and respected by the public. We went from being seen as passive women, just doing what women do for a bit of family pocket money on the side – to dedicated, knowledgeable professionals. Politicians, the media, the public: they all realised that our interests and the interests of our patients weren't antithetical, they were interdependent. Our future is shared.

The nurses' strike of 1986 may seem strange to bring up as we gather here in the wake of the recent announcement of Hazelwood's closure, to discuss a Just Transition for Australia's electricity sector.

But there are some striking similarities.

Once again, we are being told a story that tries to pit us against each other. That tries to divide our community. The environmentalists against the unionists, unionists against environmentalists. And let's be honest, many, in the past, have fallen into the trap of believing that story of division.

But, as with the nurses strike, we have reached a point where we must now take actions that ensure it is a different story that is told, listened to and repeated over and over again until the very idea that there was ever a different way seems unbelievable.

We are told saving the planet is too hard. Supporting workers to build brighter future is too hard. That we must choose one.

This is a dangerous myth.

The new story that we need to write begins with the clear recognition that we are all in this together. The choice is not between the jobs of electricity sector workers or the environment. It is not between whether our energy bills are affordable, or whether our great reefs perish. It is not between whether the people working at Hazelwood, at Loy Yang, in the Hunter Valley, in Central Queensland, in Port Augusta or in remote Western Australia are supported properly, or whether we fund new clean energy jobs. It is not between the interests of Australians or those in other countries - like our Pacific neighbours, already watching their homes and livelihoods be swallowed by a rising sea. It is not between those of us who live today and those yet to come.

The truth is that we need each other.

A Just Transition is about choosing both.

As we think about how Australia should respond to climate change, we can chart with accuracy and detail, what the impact will be for the most vulnerable sectors, like electricity. And, as the uncertainty and distress brought on by the announcement of Hazelwood's closure last week demonstrates, it is the people working in those industries who bear the brunt of that impact.

Let me remind you that closing Hazelwood was not down to a carbon tax. It was a commercial decision to close that plant. That commercial decision taken in the new reality of a world where real action on climate change is here to stay. This government has signed the Paris Agreement. Living up to those obligations must include a Just Transition for workers and their communities. When there is no plan in place – when we just leave it to the market to make decisions, it is the people, not the companies and certainly not the market, who pay the price.

We saw the effects of a market-based approach in Port Augusta this year. The market said that the South Australian Northern Power Station should be shut, and so it was. It closed without any real consultation with the workers and their community.

Despite large disruptions in the past we have not been good at industry transition in this country.

Just ask the thousands of displaced workers who used to be part of the Australian car manufacturing industry: only a third of ex-Mitsubishi workers were able to move to comparable full time employment when the South Australian plant closed in 2008.

In both of these cases, there was no plan in place to support people to obtain new, relevant jobs or help support the new industries to develop in the community. Helping people update their CVs, or giving them a token payment and a job seeker reference is not a Just Transition.

A fractious, destructive and costly market approach does not have to be the way that Australia moves to a clean energy economy. It isn't too late for Hazelwood: and the Victorian government is applying the principles of a Just Transition plan by setting up a Latrobe Valley Authority led by the Premier. They are putting \$266 million into job creation, a Worker Transition Centre in partnership with the Gippsland Trades and Labour council, education, training, counselling and financial support all of which is a promising sign that at least in the Labor government workers can have hope of a Just Transition.

The unapologetic mission of the Australian Union movement is a Just Transition for all affected workers, their families and communities into low and zero emission industry with real, decent jobs and a quality of life for their kids better than their own. It is a story in three acts:

First the Federal Government needs to develop a national plan. The need to deliver a just transition for coal-fired electricity workers and communities is a sector wide, cross-state jurisdiction challenge that can only be met with a national response.

Second, the government should create an independent statutory authority, independent of the election cycle, to guide the transition of the sector. This authority would manage an industry-wide multi-employer job pooling and redeployment scheme, and support workers obtain new decent and secure jobs, including with job assistance support, reskilling, redundancy payments, early retirement options and travel and relocation assistance.

Third, the authority would develop specific plans to diversify regional economy's industry base, support existing industries and help create new, secure jobs.

None of this is rocket science; we're not claiming to have re-invented the wheel or even the power loom. There are clear examples that provide a road map for us to follow.

The German story tells us that a planned transition can ease the negative burdens on workers– but it won't just happen if left to the market.

In Germany, the government chose to work with unions and workers rather than against them when the decision to downscale their coal mining industry was made. And we'll hear more about this process later today.

Importantly, German workers were effectively redeployed across the industry in a systematic approach to avoid the sudden negative impact of single mine closures on the surrounding community.

When the process ends in a few years' time, it will have successfully transitioned more than 100,000 workers who could otherwise have simply been left with nothing but a token redundancy payment and a nicely formatted resume.

I'm glad we are being joined by workers from Hazelwood and other power stations today, and we'll hear from one worker, Mark Richards, shortly. The people working in power stations deserve a say about what kinds of opportunities they want, about who they are and where they live, about what they spend their time doing in this short and precious life – just like we all do. We must ensure that their voices and their stories are heard most of all.

Ladies and gentlemen, it's time to start telling a new story. A story about working together.

We will stand in solidarity with workers in the electricity sector and we will fight for their jobs, their identities, and their communities. They should not have to bear the brunt of this.

During the nurses' strike, we had a slogan: "sisters are doing it for themselves... and for us."

This plan for a Just Transition represents the diverse voices of our members – 1.8 million of them, from all across Australia. And of course it especially represents the voices of electricity workers. And together we will change the story. We will build a new economy with decent jobs and a clean, protected planet – and we will only build it together.

Thank you.