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Introduction – acknowledgement of country

I want to welcome you all to this great gathering of the union movement family. It is not often that we get a chance to be together, to share our stories, our struggles, our successes and our failures.

It is the 90th anniversary of the ACTU and over this period of time, four or five generations, there would have been many, many gatherings. But looking out over this crowd, none would have been as young or as diverse.

Has there every been so many women unionists in one room together? So many people of colour? This could be dangerous.

We really could destroy the joint.

All of us, no matter what our official job title – workplace leader or union leader, are union organisers. We serve the cause of working people, making them and our movement stronger.

Every - single - person in this room has decided at some point, to dedicate their life, or part of it, to this cause.

I've had about eight jobs, but there is no job I have loved more than being a union organiser.

There is nothing more important than growing our movement and making it stronger.

I remember the first union member I signed up 23 years ago in a domestic violence shelter about 10km from here. I remember it as clear as if it were yesterday. I actually held my breath while a group of four women began filling in the membership forms.

Signing up a new member is always exciting, always fulfilling, knowing you had just added one more member to our great movement.

Seeing workers get organised and experiencing the power of that for the first time is also a privilege. It's something very special.

Being there to witness the first moment when a group of workers decide to stick together and say "no".

Such a simple, yet powerful act, sticking together and saying no.

It is not what those who thought they had the power expect of us.

No we will not comply with your unreasonable direction.

No our pay will not be cut.

No we will not put up with your bullying.

No, you will not sack our workmates.

No we will not work in unsafe conditions.

No you will not privatise our services.

No you will not sexually harass us.

No we will not work those long hours.

No we will not be working at all.

These simple, but profound acts of saying no and experiencing the power of collective defiance changes lives.

It changes what is “normal”. It changes what is acceptable. It changes individuals. It has changed our country. It has changed the world.

The indigenous workers at Wave Hill, in the Pilbara, on Palm Island said no to slave wages, to dispossession, to oppression.

In 1891 shearers said no to pay cuts.

In 1917 we said no to conscription and organised a national strike.

Women unionists said no and are still saying no to unequal pay.

People at the Eureka Stockade said no to a political system for the landowners.

100 years ago we said no to poverty level wages and won the living wage.

We said no to long working hours and won the 8 hour day.

Wharfies said no to loading iron for the Japanese before WW2.

Tom McDonald said no to working class people retiring in poverty.

Unions said no to the destruction of The Rocks and the botanical gardens just over the bay.

We said no to individual contracts.

We said no to WorkChoices.

In 1976 we organised a national strike when Malcolm Fraser tried to dismantle the early Medicare. We said no. When another Malcolm tried it on again this time last year, we said no.

We have said no to unjust laws throughout our history.

There is a lot of talk about disruption. Technology disrupting things.

But I tell you who the real disruptors are – it is us! We are the disruptors! The trade union movement through our organising has disrupted history, has change the “way things are meant to be”, has pushed those in power off course and changed history.

*We have made things better for working people, for **all** Australians. **We have changed the rules.***

We have been saying no to the greed of the few for a long time. 90 years ago we were doing this and comrades - once against we are called upon to be the disruptors, to change the rules.

This time in history, *our* time in history, demands this of us. Working people need some disruption of the status quo and we will need to be the ones who bring it.

I have a story to tell you. It is the story of corporate greed today.

Inequality is at a 70 year high.

Wage growth hasn't been this low since records started being kept.

Profits went up 40% and wages less than 2%.

40% workforce is in insecure work.

A generation of people do not know what it is like to have a paid sick day or holiday.

Our minimum wage does not keep people out of poverty.

Wage theft is a business model where employers ignore our minimum wages – from celebrity chefs to multinational pizza chains.

Employers have been bending and breaking the protections working people have built.

Wealth has gone to top 1% along with the power that goes with this wealth. This has accelerated since the GFC.

The richest 1 per cent of Australians owns more wealth than the bottom 70 per cent of Australian citizens combined.

678 corporations paid no tax.

48 millionaires paid no tax, not even the Medicare levy.

Wealth and power has become so unbalanced.

One group of people now have too much power.

The rules that were meant to protect our rights are now not strong enough. They need to be rewritten.

We need to change the rules to make them pay their fair share of tax. We need to change the rules so working people have more power.

Surely the answer to the greed of the few is more power for the many.

We need better and stronger rights at work.

The only way we will do this is by building a strong union movement, by people joining us and coming together to demand politicians change the rules and demanding employers play by them.

The pendulum can only swing back when our power is enough to balance theirs.

Why am I am telling you this story? I am telling you this story because it is the story you need to tell.

As organisers we know – it is our job to clearly and powerfully explain the issue. When enough people are angry and feel strongly enough about the issue we will be able to change the rules.

We must start where we are the strongest, with our members, then move out to non-members asking them to join us and then reach out to the community asking them to support us.

So every person here needs to tell the story of inequality, of power and how a strong union movement changing the rules is the answer.

Everyone needs to tell the big picture I've just painted.

If every single one of us does this with workplace leaders we are doing what we need to do to build a powerful movement.

We want to build a huge booming voice of hundreds of thousands of working Australians saying the rules in our country have got to change.

The second thing we all need to do it this – we need to find the real life examples of the rules being unfair or broken and tell *those* stories. We all know the power of real life stories. Stories of real people in your workplaces and stories that are from your community.

We need to tell as many people as possible both the big story and the real life ones that illustrate it.

Think about how the CUB dispute told the story of labour hire being used with an EBA signed by a couple of people to cut pay and conditions. Employers using labour hire in this way is rife. But the CUB dispute bought this home. Find and tell these stories.

Think about the story of the hotel cleaner Margarita who is going to lose \$70/week through penalty rates cuts. Find and tell the stories of all the Margaritas around the country.

Think about the stories of wage theft that are rife in every community, right across our community. Find and tell these stories.

Think about all the examples of out of control multinationals thugging working people through lockouts all because they can and because of their greed. Tell these stories.

Construction unions, find and tell the real stories of the ABCC, of the Code. I remember the story of Ark Tribe, of the young people dragged into interrogations. They were powerful.

Think about the stories in your industries, in your communities of insecure work: rolling contracts, years being casual, of being told to get an ABN, of the stress of working for a labour hire firm. Tell these stories. They resonate.

For those of you who witness the shocking exploitation of temporary visa workers. Tell these stories.

And when we tell these stories say we need to change the rules to stop this occurring.

We are the ones who see how broken the rules are every - single - day. Every union has social media. You have social media. You have smart phones. You have union meetings and community meetings.

Our members and the community need to understand how broken the rules are, how weak and inadequate our rights at work are, in order for them to join with us in a movement that will demand change.

Because change can happen. When we have built our unions and organised towards a common goal we have achieved big change.

When Tom and Audrey McDonald started as young organisers 70 years ago, none of their members had secure work. None. *No one* had workers compensation. *No one* had

superannuation. Women didn't have equal pay. There was no Medicare. They were organisers at a time of penal laws, when going on strike bought with it big fines plus jail terms.

People would have said that it is just the way things are. It is inevitable that jobs are insecure. Inevitable that some people will have more and others less. That working people should know their place because things will not change. But they didn't accept that. They built movements to change the rules.

And they did.

So can we.

We are the people who will lead the building of this movement. We need to be the disruptors. Let's go out and tell the story of inequality, broken rules and of hope.

This will not happen overnight. It has taken the right 30 years of union bashing and neo-liberalism to take us where we are now.

Taking on the most powerful in our society will not be easy. But it wasn't easy for Tom or Audrey. They didn't do it overnight. We all need to commit to being in it for the long haul. We need to commit to taking things forward and building the foundation for the next generation of union officials who will be sitting in this room. We want them to look back and say on this spot on the 26th June 2017 1000 unionists, and those watching on Facebook Live - started the fight to change the rules.

And that is the simple decision we need to make right now. Is this the day? Is this the day, are we the people, are we the generation of working people who will stand up and start the fight?

Are you up for it?

Now let me talk about union growth on how we are going to approach turning around union decline? Think of it like a jigsaw with many parts to the picture, because as we have learnt,

there is no silver bullet. There are many things that come together to form this picture. Some little things and some big things.

Changing the rules at work is a big thing.

We need new laws that enable the growing of the union movement. Part of this is working people having stronger rights.

- if we can enforce rights quickly and easily workers see that, this is an exercise in power and it is part of the picture
- if delegates are free to represent their members without the fear of being sacked, this is part of the picture
- if more working people have secure jobs, they will be more confident standing up for themselves and joining their union, this is part of the picture
- if working people can bargain where the power really is, at the top of a supply chain or across an industry, this is part of the picture
- if working people can withdraw their labour without the threat of their jobs and fines, this is power and this is part of the picture

Building a movement to *change the rules*, and inspiring the younger generation that they can be in a movement that makes real change, is part of the picture.

But the biggest part of the picture is empowering delegates – putting members at the centre of decision-making, organising our workplaces and our industries. This requires as all to excellent organisers.

Over the next three days you will have a chance to become better at your craft. To share stories of success and of failure. The more we spread and share our skills and lessons, the better we will *all be*. We will be better equipped to win and to grow.

To do this we need to adopt a certain attitude. It is the attitude of comradeliest. Is it a word comradeliness? Who cares if it is not, let's make it one.

It is about being generous to each other. This is about supporting each other and being prepared to share. This is about putting aside the barriers that stop us from doing so. We need to share our stories of failure just as much as we share our stories of success.

Why don't we do this enough? Well, because we love our unions, we love our members, we are proud and that can make us defensive.

But I put this to you – if we love our union and our greater union movement – we will only get better if we share and we share honestly.

We need to learn from our failures as well as our successes so we do not repeat history. Whenever a comrade is prepared to tell the story of something that doesn't work they are being generous. This is a gift they are giving to you and your members. Reciprocate. Let's not talk any one of us, or any union down. Every single one of us has had failures. It is not the failure that is the issue, it is not learning from it that holds us back.

And if we all share we will all get better faster. So I ask you to adopt an attitude of comradeship toward each.

By being generous we open ourselves up to innovation. What is innovation? It's doing things differently and better. Taking things forward. It doesn't have to be new. It can simply be doing what we know works slightly better or applying it somewhere we haven't before. It may be doing something completely different. We need to be open to innovation by trying things out in ways that are low risk so we can learn from our mistakes.

This is what companies do. Think about your mobile phone. Now think about what it couldn't do 10 years ago: email, internet, geolocate, siri, apps. These innovations come from going through a process that involves trial and error. That's why we are at iPhone 6. We need to innovate as a union movement.

You will hear about the trials and innovations unions have undertaken with the support of the ACTU and independently. The aim is to trial, to learn and to spread the learnings.

So innovation is part of the picture of turning around union decline.

But there are more pieces to the picture and some are completely within our control.

I want to leave you with this.

I started by saying we are all organisers. I still see myself as leader as an organiser.

Organising changes the world.

This is the way we will win new rules.

This is the way we will challenge unjust laws.

By organising.

But I know none of our jobs are easy.

I certainly remember times of doubt, especially on a hard day when everything seems to go wrong and the boss seems to be winning.

Those days you can think:

“Am I making a difference?”

“Is it worth it?”

“Am I just a drop in the ocean at a time we are facing record inequality, insecure work, unjust laws and record corporate power”

When you have one of those days – which we all will - I want you to remember this day. The day you sat in this room with 1000 other unionists who all committed to start the campaign to change the rules, by organising, by conversations, by story telling.

Each of us is going to talk to hundreds of working people. Each of us is going to tell the story of inequality, the rules being broken and how the union movement can change the rules.

Remember the faces in this room. They are doing just what you are doing. You might have had a bad day, but someone else is having a good one.

You are not JUST a drop.

You are part of a powerful ocean.

A big disruptive ocean!

Comrades – we are going to do something big. And we are going to do it together.

We are going to change history.

We are going to change the rules.

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ENDS