

**Opening address by ACTU Secretary Jeff Lawrence  
ACTU Indigenous Conference, Darwin  
16 February 2011**

I want to acknowledge that we meet on Larrakia land and acknowledge the elders past and present.

The turn out for this conference is impressive and I believe demonstrates the union movement's commitment to improving life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, their families, and communities.

Australian unions have always stood by our Indigenous brothers and sisters. We stood with Indigenous workers in the Wave Hill Walk out; in fighting for land rights, and stolen wages.

But there are some who feel we have been too absent recently and have not done enough to help with the issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities today.

Or as one elder has put it more bluntly: "The union helped my family when they walked off Wave Hill Station . . . Like you helped my ancestors, I need your help now."

I'm here at this conference because I think it's time that a greater emphasis and focus of the union movement needs to be on what is happening to Indigenous people and communities now.

But I know that just turning up is not enough. Like all of you here, we will be required to act on what we learn. And commit to taking action plans back to our unions, and community groups.

Recently I was fortunate to participate on a delegation to Central Australia – what stuck with me, was the real need for us to be ready to be here for the long haul.

We know while unions have been able to achieve significant gains for members and communities through bargaining and community campaigning, thousands of Indigenous workers remain without basic rights and are usually employed in the most vulnerable and insecure types of work.

Recognising this, in 2003 the ACTU Congress formally resolved that it was committed to the development of an effective partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. We believe that such a partnership should continue to work towards the redress of the economic and social disadvantage faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly in relation to employment.

The policy objectives are clear – equality in education, employment, access to services, health, housing, and political participation. The discussion must focus on the implementation of policy so that all Indigenous Australians experience the opportunities a First World country provides, within contexts and frameworks that are appropriate to way in which Indigenous Australians live.

Our delegation to Central Australia – which I'll report back on later today – came back with an understanding of the size of the issues, but also a belief in the commitment and strength of Indigenous Australians – who work hard for a better life for them and their families. And who have asked for our help to achieve this.

We start from basic principles. Everyone should have the right to self-determination, empowerment and respect.

We need to look at structures, like local governments, that are the heart of small communities – and look at how the communities can give back.

We need to ensure that all workers are treated equally: with equal pay and conditions. Access to key benefits like workers' compensation and superannuation, so they get decent retirements. There should be a focus on building good jobs that grow communities and empowers those in it.

The ACTU has a full agenda for this year, in which we want to engage Indigenous Australians.

We will be conducting a national workers' census – that would be incomplete if it did not include the voice of Indigenous Australians. We will be asking for your help – to talk to your brothers and sisters and encourage them to participate in the census.

Australian unions are in a discussion about good jobs – what does that mean? Over half of all workers are in insecure employment – what does it mean for them and their life outside of work?

In what ways are Indigenous Australians impacted by insecure work? Are these problems unique or shared with other Australian workers?

We want to find out how to increase job security and give all working people more control over their lives?

Importantly we need to grow unions – to giving working Australians a stronger voice. We want to improve bargaining – so more Australians have access to it. And we want workers to have a voice in their workplace – with improved delegate rights.

This is an agenda for all working Australians, and I see Indigenous Australians as an important part in this.

However, I also recognise there are a unique set of issues – many arising in the Territory – that require solidarity with Indigenous Australians. And Australian unions will stand with our Indigenous brothers and sisters.

I can not promise that we will see fast change. The issues with CDEP do not have a quick fix. Rebuilding communities and good jobs will take time.

What I can say, is that Australian unions will do what we can – with an emphasis on encouraging engagement with communities, strengthening the voice of Indigenous Australians – and standing up for their rights at work. We will work to increase union membership of Indigenous Australians and strengthen their representation in union structures: a role that the ACTU Indigenous Committee has already made great contribution to.

I see this as a long term commitment and a partnership between the ACTU, Australian unions, and Indigenous Australians.

Thank you for attending this Indigenous Conference – the first we've held in Darwin. We have a lot of work to do over the next three days – I'm looking forward to meeting many of you and getting on with the job.