

The Union Agenda for 2013
Address by ACTU Secretary Dave Oliver to the National Press Club
Canberra, 6 February 2013

***** EMBARGOED TO 1pm – CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*****

Thank you Maurice and thank you all for being here today – especially to my union colleagues and members who are here.

I am very aware that I am here at the National Press Club following recent speeches from both the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader, and, among other things, the 2013 election date was announced.

But before I go to the union movement's position on the election and our activities I want to step back a little and look at why unions take more than a passing interest in the way our country is governed, and why elections are of such importance to us.

The ACTU was formed during the roaring 1920s, when business was booming, the stock-market was soaring and the unmitigated free-market seemed to be the answer to every question.

Of course, as we all know now, the boom of the twenties was a very fragile thing. Within five years, the stock-market had collapsed, the economy had soured and tens of thousands of Australians had lost their jobs in the wake of a global depression.

During that period, the ACTU found its voice. It spoke not just on behalf of its members, but on behalf of all workers, and it has continued to play that role, throughout its 86 year history.

During the postwar period, it ensured everyone in our society benefitted from that boom.

Then in the '70s, the ACTU was defined by the presidency of Bob Hawke. It's hardly surprising that a movement drawn from the working population was led by someone who epitomised what it meant to be Australian: a larrikin, a story-teller, an easy going mate with a downplayed but very sharp intelligence.

In the 1980s and early-90's, Bill Kelty led the union movement through Australia's greatest period of economic upheaval and reform. The legacy from that era is a superannuation system that is the envy of the world, and a social wage developed in co-operation with the Labor Government and the leadership of business groups of the time.

In no small measure, the boom in our economy during the late 90s and 2000s was unleashed by the reforms of this era. And the fact that workers have gotten their fair share of *that* boom is thanks to the union movement - unlike the boom of today, which we say was squandered by the Howard Government.

The late 90's and 2000s were bookended by two hard-fought iconic industrial disputes. It's no coincidence that the Coalition was in power during this period.

In 1998, despite John Howard having previously pledged to govern on behalf of everyone, and make Australia more "relaxed and comfortable", the waterfront dispute erupted.

Hired thugs in balaclavas patrolled the workplace with dogs. Wharfies were thrown out of their workplaces.

Seven years later, workers were confronted with WorkChoices, which sought to make people's working conditions anything but relaxed and comfortable. This threat saw the ACTU mobilise through the Your Rights at Work campaign, putting forward the proposition that everyone should be treated fairly when they're at work.

Put simply: everyone deserves a 'fair go'. People seemed to agree with us on that.

Our history has lessons for what I believe workers want from unions today.

I've been a union official for the past 24 years, and Secretary of the ACTU for about eight months, and in that time, I've been around the country listening to what workers think about their jobs and the economy.

To everyday people, the economy is not an abstract ratio of outputs over inputs. It is part of their day-to-day lives and they experience its changes in many ways, both good and bad.

The economy is something that can reward them or scare them; something that gets them out of bed in the morning fresh and enthused and sometimes keeps them lying awake at night worried sick; and it's something that requires them to make risky calculations and important decisions.

Like - should I change my job? Should I take out that loan? Can I really afford that holiday? What subjects should I encourage my child to study at school so they don't end up in a dead end? If they're unlucky, the economy can stop them being able to plan weekends, stop them being able to afford holidays, and stop them spending time with their children and grandchildren.

The economy is more than statistics – it is also part of people's idea of what Australia is and should be. What sort of life it can promise.

It is union values that people bring up when they talk about what they want out of their job.

I learned my union values as a kid who left school at 15 to do an apprenticeship in a small manufacturing outfit in Botany in Sydney.

Exposed to asbestos for much of my four years there... I didn't know what being a union member meant until I finally left the place and got a start on a construction site as a lift mechanic.

It was there I learned about having rights. It was there I learned about having a say, about being well paid and respected as a human being. I learnt the meaning of dignity at work.

Those are the things I know that workers most value about their jobs, and they were the very things that John Howard's IR laws sought to undo.

The Howard era *must* be looked on as a missed opportunity.

Because after the '80s and '90s and more than a decade of collaboration between the union movement, government and the business sector, the Howard Government's ideology insisted that working people would no longer have a place at the table.

Unions, government and business sat around the table during a period of massive reform – opening up the economy - and then collaboration stopped.

And so began a decade of missed opportunity and decline in some of our most critical industries - caused by a government that constructed an environment of industrial conflict instead of collaboration.

An absolutely appalling way to let ideology get in the way of managing the economy and protecting workers' jobs.

The role of unions

I was reflecting, just the weekend before last, as our country stopped to celebrate Australia Day why our nation is recognised around the world as one of the best places to live and work.

Public holidays, penalty rates, annual leave, sick leave, superannuation – these things weren't given to us by benevolent employers, they weren't given to us by generous governments. They were fought for and won by workers taking collective action, and campaigning as part of the their own union or the broader union movement.

We are out there every day trying to get a better deal for workers in this country. And yep, sometimes we take industrial action, which is a fundamental human right, and unions and our supporters should never apologise for standing up for that right.

Because for the working people that unions represent – a good life – depends on having a good, well-paid, secure job.

Secure Jobs

The increase in insecure work is affecting more people across workplaces than any other, and is the issue that working people have told us needs to be addressed if we are to keep the notion of a work life balance and a fair go.

The independent inquiry run by Brian Howe, and its findings is something that Ged Kearney has previously spoken about here at the Press Club, so I will only touch on the key points.

People understand that employment relationships will likely never go back to the old days of a guaranteed job for life. But they feel instinctively that an economy that loads all of the risk onto employees to the benefit of employers is wrong. Simply wrong. Immoral. Not what a job in Australia is about.

Let's look at what's happening in other parts of the world.

Last year IBM in Germany announced its plan to eliminate up to 8,000 of its 20,000 workforce through a new program it calls 'Liquid'. Apart from the company's executives, all other staff will be hired on a project-by-project basis, for days or months according to need.

And here's the really scary part of it: workers will be chosen from applicants who register on an electronic personnel platform derived from the auction site eBay. And because all contracts will be global, national labour laws will not apply. Holidays are pre-digital.

It's the neo-liberal labour market at work: people bidding each other's wages and conditions down in a race to the bottom in the hope of finding any work at all.

If we let this become the norm for employment in the 21st century, who will be responsible for them when they injure themselves at work?

Without unions, who will ask the question about these people's rights to sick pay, to holidays?

An economy that provides job security is important for all of us.

How can we have quality education if our teachers and childcare workers don't feel secure about their jobs or their ability to earn a reliable income?

How can we have decent health care if nurses don't have decent conditions and workloads.

How can we have decent communities if parents are at the whim of an SMS to know when their next shift starts, instead of being able to plan ahead so they can be reliably involved in their kids' sport or education?

How can we talk about being a country with an 8-hour day or 4 weeks annual leave or sick leave - if 40% of our workforce don't have it?

We can't, that's why unions are taking this issue on.

In the past, when the union movement has put a serious reform issue on the table, it has not been something we've expected to solve overnight.

Great reforms like superannuation, paid parental leave, the protection of workers entitlements are all battles that took 20 or more years of union campaigning to win.

I'm not saying that we want to wait 20 years to reverse this trend that has allowed insecure work to take grip.

But we don't expect to have the job-lot solved by September 14.

However, there are a few things we will be raising during this election period.

We live in a world where many people have two or three employers one week, and the next week just one. In this world, entitlements that we all agree should be the right of everyone with an Australian job - things like annual leave and sick leave - don't translate very well.

If you're doing nine hours at one childcare employer and 18 hours at another, and you get sick, at the moment, you probably have no right to sick pay from either boss.

Now, some industries have solved this problem. In many parts of the construction industry, those entitlements travel with you, across employers from job to job, accruing regardless of who's paying you.

We go into this election saying that all workers should have this. As Australians, we work hard, and we deserve our holidays. When we get sick our bills don't stop - we need to know that we'll still be able to make rent or cover the mortgage. They are things that every working Australian should have.

And the way to achieve that is through a national scheme to make those entitlements available to everyone, by making them portable.

Of course, the other thing that Australians enjoy is their weekends. It means time with family and friends, it means that you don't just live to work, but work to live.

We're not against weekend work, but working on the weekend should mean something different. There is an extra sacrifice we take when we miss the football or can't go out with our friends. And employers need to know that working weekends is different. That's what penalty rates are about.

That's why we'll be asking the government to enshrine penalty rates for weekend work - in legislation, to protect it forever.

The rise of insecure work has been a silent, creeping yet fundamental shift in the economy over the past 20 years, with major implications for people's lives and for our economy.

We want to work with the government, we want to work with employers and we want to work with the best minds from our universities and the community sector.

To this end we will be hosting a secure jobs summit in Canberra in March - bringing people together to talk about the issue and begin the discussion about ways to solve the problem.

And we will continue to campaign on this issue no matter who wins the election. This is an agenda that is about working people, not an election cycle.

Relevance of unions

There's always talk from business or conservative commentators about the relevance of unions to working Australians today.

I'd like to crack this open.

The union movement, with almost 2 million members, is by far the largest democratic group in Australia. But the figure of 2 million is only where our influence begins.

The fact is that 44% or almost 5 million people work under pay and conditions set by collective agreements negotiated by a union. And a further 16% depend directly on the Award system or the minimum wage that was put in place and is still defended by the union movement.

For the 1.4 million people on the minimum wage - and I want you to think about this - these are the cleaners, shelf packers, retail workers, shop assistants, some aged care workers - the only chance of a wage rise for these people comes with the minimum wage case prosecuted by the ACTU in May, each year.

Last year, some employer submissions said that the low paid should receive no wage increase at all, others accepted some increase, but well below CPI. The ACTU fought for a real wage increase of \$26, with the final decision being just over \$17 per week. That is why our role is more important than ever.

Who will speak up for the lowest paid if not unions?

I've negotiated hundreds of agreements in my 24 years as an official and I've never once had a boss say, 'good to see you Dave, we've had a bumper year, the company's going great and we are looking forward to paying out a big wage rise this time'.

Business groups always run the line that times are tight, and that wage restraint is needed to save jobs. But workers don't see their managers taking pay cuts to save jobs, or executive bonuses being restrained. There is a fundamental lack of integrity in their arguments.

That's why unions will always be relevant.

The growth of union membership is something that Ged Kearney and I, and the rest of the union movement's leadership are focussed on improving. When we campaign, we grow.

Indeed, the recent re-unionisation of Rio workers at Bell Bay by the AWU demonstrates that workers will respond to a union that is fighting for their interests and asks them to join.

I believe that the campaigns we've been running:

- the campaign for equal pay run by the Australian Services Union;
- the campaign for better school funding run by the education unions;
- the campaign for better care in hospitals run by the Australian Nurses Federation;
- the Safe Rates campaign for safer roads run by the Transport Workers' Union;
- the Big Steps campaign for childcare workers;
- the mining union's campaign to spread the benefits of the boom;
- the campaign by the manufacturing unions for active industry policy that delivers jobs today and in the future for manufacturing workers;
- public sector unions campaigning to protect jobs and services against government cuts.

This is the modern union movement at work and these campaigns are the keys to our success.

In these campaigns, working Australians see the sort of agenda that they know will improve not just their take home pay or conditions, but their way of life.

Australians are crying out for someone to stand up with an overall vision of a good society where work and life are balanced, where businesses do not choose short-term cost savings over giving our young people apprenticeships. Where it is not okay to dodge a long-term need to invest in training by bringing skilled workers from overseas on a temporary basis and not offering *them* a career or a life in Australia either.

Australians know that we need a government with policies for a thriving community and not just an upward arrow on a chart of numbers.

With an election in eight months, I am here because our political leaders *need* to know what workers will be voting on, will care about, and what the ACTU will be highlighting in the federal election period.

We believe that the policies that have made Australian jobs the best jobs in the world need to be defended.

Australians see the standards we had built up collapsing, and they fear not only for their own jobs, but for the jobs they worry might not be there for their children.

So the union movement's agenda will be focussed on job and income security, and the things that have always been a part of the fair go at work.

The Federal Election

Labor should welcome unions playing this role in the election. The Coalition probably won't.

When the Coalition makes a mistake like they did in 2006 with WorkChoices, they do not want the union movement to be able to hold them to account.

Unions were only able to make such a big difference at the 2007 election because we stood alongside Australians of all walks of life defending our rights and what Australians believe should be the standard in this country for them for their kids and for everyone who works here.

It was never about the advertising dollars we spent in 2007 – when we were outspent 10 to 1 by the Howard Government using tax-payers’ money.

It was our movement that made the difference.

Our 2 million members and the millions more workers who rely on us to negotiate their collective agreements, or fight for a higher minimum wage.

And that will be how we reach out to the public again this year.

But what we know about Tony Abbott is that he is no friend of working people.

He has tried to re-invent himself, but Tony Abbott is still the same man who once said that a bad boss was like a bad husband – doing more good than harm.

Or that the law that protected workers from being unfairly dismissed was just a monkey to get off small business’s backs.

Or calling workers who were fighting to protect their entitlements - “economic traitors”.

And who will ever forget that Tony Abbott accused Bernie Banton of being a man “*not pure of heart*”.

What Tony Abbott is most threatened by is a union movement which is able to hold Government – *of all stripes* – to account.

This is why we know Tony Abbott will use the recent stories of corruption to demonise and weaken *all* unions.

Because a strong union movement is an anathema to the Liberal Party. It always has been and it always will be.

So there is a lot at stake in this coming election.

I was elected to lead the union movement last year on a platform of increasing and entrenching our campaigning capacity. To lead a high-profile, campaigning movement with an independent agenda and broad alliances in the community.

This election period is simply the first step for unions to begin building our capacity to campaign together across all industries for common issues.

And while we have 2 million members – here is a figure you should consider – there are over 280,000 union members in 38 of the most marginal electorates in Australia.

And for the next eight months, we intend to mobilise them and speak to the hundreds of thousands of other workers in those areas.

Nurses who are union members will talk to other nurses about the role of government to better fund healthcare.

Teachers who are union members will talk to other teachers about the importance of the Gonski reforms.

Childcare workers, truck drivers, manufacturing workers, retail, hospitality, and construction workers who are members of their union will talk to their co-workers about what we need to make our jobs more secure, our industries better paid, our career paths more rewarding, and our government more active in protecting those rights.

We will be asking all voters to think about what it is that makes an Australian job something that people the world over envy and admire?

Is it a job, secure enough to allow us to plan for our next holiday?

Is it a job that allows us to spend time with our family on the weekends, or being able to go part time if we decide to start a family?

Perhaps it's just about being secure enough that the bank will loan you money to buy your own home.

Our point is that an Australian job has been, and should be all of these things. But those conditions can only be guaranteed by confronting head on the insecurity that many workers in this country feel about their jobs.

So I'm here today to say that the Australian union movement will be unashamedly making sure that the interests of working people are on the agenda for all political parties in this election.

And today I conclude by posing a number of questions to Tony Abbott that do need answering:

Will you guarantee the Australian people that you will not again attack their pay and conditions?

What is your plan for the auto industry that employs 200 000 workers, and further - what is your plan for manufacturing?

Are you committed to co-investment and taking a strong policy stance on the auto, steel and aluminium industries?

Will you stick to your position of making it even easier to import foreign labour or instead will you commit to talking to industry about investing in skills and apprenticeships?

Will you support workers and their unions in their right to collectively bargain and campaign?

Will you give every worker a guarantee that you will not take away their current protection from unfair dismissal?

How many public sector workers will go if you are elected?

Will you make a commitment to Australians, to Australian jobs and to working with the Australian unions that defend them?

To both parties, I say, support our campaign to keep the Aussie Weekend sacred, by enshrining penalty rates in law.

And commit to being involved in a process with unions, business and community groups, to find a solution to the job and income insecurity that is gnawing away at the lives of so many working people.

There are many months until September, but the union movement will be campaigning long after the votes have been counted.

Eighty-six years ago, the ACTU started campaigning on behalf of all Australian workers.

We've had our battles, we've fought our fights, but we enter this election year knowing that whenever we've set our sights on something, ultimately we have prevailed.

Thank you.

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