

**‘State of the Union’**  
**Address by ACTU President Ged Kearney to the ACTU Indigenous Conference**  
**Tuesday, 20 May 2014**  
**Tiffins on the Park, Adelaide**

**\*\*\* CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY\*\*\***

I wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, the Kurna (pronounced: Ga-ur-na) peoples, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Good morning everyone.

How heart-warming it is to be among you all today.

Welcome to all of you, but can I extend a special greeting to those of you who have travelled great distances to be here, including our international guests. .

Every day I feel privileged to be in this position, representing a movement of about 2 million hard-working people and their families as the voice of Australian workers.

But days like these are extra special, where I have the privilege of speaking directly to, and thanking directly, our unsung heroes. Union delegates, activists and organisers are the engine room of the Australian Union movement.

You guys are the ones in workplaces every day advocating for the rights of co-workers, being the shoulder to cry on, making sure your workplace is safe, making sure everyone is being treated fairly. You are the face of the Australian Union movement in your workplaces and your communities.

We are a movement which is dedicated to spending every waking hour working for a better life for all Australians, not just a privileged few.

Dedicated to equality and justice.

Dedicated to better working conditions, safer workplaces and giving workers a say.

And dedicated to ensuring that Australian Unions are modern and dynamic, that they are diverse and relevant to the everyday concerns of all working Australians and their families.

I have always believed in the power of the collective, the solidarity of a union, as the greatest force for change not only in workplaces but in society.

Alone, we can feel powerless, but together and united – and organised – we can achieve great things.

And we have achieved great things, as our history proves.

The way of life we enjoy today, in modern Australia, has been built on a social compact where everyone has basic rights, where we provide social protections to look after those who for one reason or another would otherwise be left behind, we reward hard work, and we ensure that wealth is spread evenly.

These are the values of Australian Unions.

It means that everyone who has a job receives a wage that is a living wage, and if they work on weekends or public holidays they get penalty rates.

It means access to health care and education for all.

It means if you get sick, or you are elderly, or for whatever reason you lose your job, you will not be left to fend for yourself.

Sadly, for many decades, these rights were not extended to First Australians.

Indigenous Australians were treated as second class citizens: dispossessed of their land, robbed of their culture and heritage, stolen from their families and communities, and denied the basic rights and services that white Australians took for granted.

Australian unions must bear some of the shame for allowing this to happen, and for standing by far too long without taking up the cudgels on behalf of our Indigenous brothers and sisters.

But we can also take pride, that it was unions who were key participants in the movement for change that finally resulted in these rights being extended to Indigenous Australians.

Australian unions have supported the long struggle of Indigenous people for recognition of their civil rights and treatment as equals.

It is a struggle that connects strongly with the values of unionism: equality, fairness and collective action.

The Wave Hill walk-off in 1966 that resulted in the land rights movement began as a dispute about rights and workers.

Paid meagre wages and toiling in appalling conditions, Gurindji workers took a stand to be treated fairly and with dignity as workers, to earn a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. Supporting them was Mr Daniels, a union organiser.

Before then, in the 1940s, a brave woman called Daisy Bindi led walk-offs and strikes in north-western Australia to demand that Aboriginal workers should receive a regular wage.

And Eddie Mabo, perhaps the most famous land rights activist of them all, was a passionate trade unionist who organised and fought to get more jobs for Indigenous people working on railways and the wharves of north Queensland.

Each of you today is following in their footsteps.

Some battles are unfinished, and there are new and different struggles today, but what remains unchanged is that unions continue to have a special focus on representing and organising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, who may have gained equality on paper, but continue to be severely disadvantaged in terms of their access to decent jobs as well as to essential services such as education and health.

Over the next few days, you will strategise and you will learn new tools to build power in your workplaces to collectively overcome the challenges you face, and just as importantly, contribute to a modern, dynamic, campaigning union movement.

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This conference comes at a crucial moment in our country's history.

Last week's Budget, taking its cue from the National Commission of Audit, was a cruel, heartless document, constructed from a fabric of lies and designed to inflict the maximum pain on the most vulnerable in our society, while protecting the wealthy and privileged.

After concocting a Budget ‘emergency’, Tony Abbott and Joe Hockey used the Budget to advance an ideological agenda devised in the boardrooms of corporate Australia, to make the poor, the aged, the sick and the young feel the pinch so big business can continue on its merry, profit-making way.

This is nothing short of a savage assault on the Australian way of life and famous egalitarianism.

They have taken a wrecking ball to the social wage that unions spent the best part of a century in building.

Clearly the Liberal Government vision is of a harsher, less equal Australia.

Universal healthcare is over with, the introduction of a Medicare co-payment which will put pressure on low income families who for going to the doctor will now become a financial decision.

They are cutting the real value of all pensions – including the age and disability support pensions, and single parents payment – which in today’s terms, will be a cut of about \$200 a fortnight by 2030 to those people that can least afford it.

In a disgraceful move young job seekers will need to participate in job search and employment services for six months before they can begin receiving Newstart or youth allowance that will leave these people in poverty.

Young people who are training to learn a trade will lose direct financial support and instead be saddled with debt well into their working lives.

The Government is making it harder for Australians to save for a decent retirement by freezing the increase to the Superannuation Guarantee for four years as well as lifting the retirement age to 70.

Fees for university will go through the roof and students will start paying real interest on their debts and pay them back from a lower income.

Tony Abbott, the self-described “Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs”, has slashed \$534 million from the Indigenous budget through the consolidation of 26 programs down to five.

Tony Abbott, “the Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs”, has slashed \$165 million from the Indigenous health budget.

Tony Abbott, “the Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs”, has ceased funding for the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples.

This leaves the only voice for Aboriginal people in the hands of Warren Mundine and the hand-picked Indigenous Advisory Council.

And to rub salt in the wounds, the savings made from these cuts aren’t to be reinvested in more innovative or socially crucial and self-determined programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but will be redirected into the Medical Research Future Fund and to “repair the Budget and fund policy priorities”.

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Last year, Tony Abbott was only too happy to campaign in a high-vis vest and a hard hat at worksites across the country.

He was only too happy to declare that he was the PM for Indigenous Affairs.

But he has not delivered for workers, he has not delivered for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people - but has delivered in spades for big business.

They've delivered for big business in the form of a 1.5% company tax cut, they're still giving over \$4 billion worth of subsidies to the big miners.

This Budget tells us what type of Australia the Abbott Government believes in.

It is a recipe for the Americanisation of Australian society, with wide spread disparities of inequality and huge pockets of poverty and working poor.

And this is just the start.

Because soon they will also have their sights set on workers' wages and conditions.

Coalition MPs and the employer lobby are openly campaigning to abolish penalty rates.

Proposed amendments to the Fair Work Act would see the widespread use of Individual Flexibility Agreements, which would once again allow employers to dictate pay and conditions to workers with little regard for a collective agreement or Award.

And the Productivity Commission review into the workplace system will be another Trojan horse to continue the project that began with WorkChoices.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers already earn significantly less than their non-Indigenous counterparts.

We know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers are more represented in the lowest paid and most vulnerable industries and most insecure employment in Australia.

And yet Tony Abbott, "the Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs" won't fight for them.

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All this talk about a stronger economy is about repaying big business for its support of the Liberal-National Party.

None of it delivers a better life for working people.

Mr Abbott wants to take us backwards, to force ordinary people to accept that they can no longer have the Australian way of life.

He'll sacrifice jobs, cut pay and conditions, get rid of penalty rates and unfair dismissal protection.

The outcome will be a society where fewer and fewer people enjoy extraordinary wealth, and more and more people work just to get by.

That's if they can get a job, where as each week passes thousands more jobs disappear or go overseas.

Why should the people who can least afford it be the ones who have to take the hit?

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Having come to power through the most dishonest campaign in living memory, Abbott and the Coalition were so arrogant they thought they could inflict their agenda while ordinary Australians mutely stood by.

Well, they were wrong.

Tens of thousands of Australians took to the streets on the Sunday just gone to make it known this is not the Australia they want to live in: an Australia that starves the poor and the sick, turns its back on the aged and frail, locks its gates to those who come across the seas in search of a better and peaceful life, and demonises its young, single parents and its Indigenous citizens.

The anger and passion on Sunday was palpable.

The opinion polls tell us that the silent majority shares this disgust at being lied to this way and at being told they must bear the burden while the wealthy and corporate Australia avoid the heavy lifting.

On Sunday, I spoke at the March in May rally in Melbourne, and I can tell you that once again the people of Australia are looking for leadership from the largest democratic movement in this country: trade unions.

It is our responsibility in this room to summon the power of our collective movement of 2 million Australians and begin the fightback for our way of life.

A way of life made up of:

- Fairness, decency, equality.
- A strong social safety net.
- A living wage and access to health and education for all.

These are the essential parts of a civilised and productive society.

They are not entitlements, not handouts, not charity.

They are rights, rights that we have fought for and rights we must protect.

Tony Abbott and the Coalition don't like unions.

They are throwing everything they can at us in an attempt to distract, hinder and weaken our movement.

I am not talking only about the politically-motivated witch-hunt that is the royal commission.

And the reason is simple. Because unions stand between Tony Abbott and what he's willing to do ordinary Australians to please the big end of town.

Every day it is unions that are standing up to protect what we already have – and build on it for a better life.

It is happening at this very moment. In Melbourne, the ACTU is this morning arguing the case in the Fair Work Commission to lift the minimum wage by \$27 a week.

It must rise, we argue, to prevent the gap between the lowest-paid and the rest of the workforce from widening, so we can avoid a permanent underclass in this country of an American-style working poor.

Of course, the employers oppose an increase of that size.

Inequality in America and the UK has been able to grow so wide because unions have been weakened and lost relevance and influence.

Business wants to do the same here, but we will resist it.

But it is not enough to stand still.

Australian unions must reverse the decline in workplace density of recent years, we must grow, we must modernise, we must become noisier and better organised.

The ACTU has been revamping its own structures to become a modern, permanent campaigning machine.

We have invested heavily in our online and data collection infrastructure, our social media and new websites to spread the message, and television advertising to raise the profile of unions.

We have plans in train to make it easier for people to join our movement, as a supporter or as full union members.

Everyone in this room needs to think about how they can contribute: to offer ideas and to recommit to growing this mighty movement both in size and in relevance and influence.

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Australians are not bludgers. We work hard, and we pay our taxes. And we expect a basic level of government support in return. We do not deserve to be punished in this way.

A permanent, deliberate cut in living standards will hurt not just today's workers, but their families.

It's their children who will be hurt the most.

They'll not only grow up in households where their parents worry more, they'll face fewer opportunities for a better life when they grow up and look for work.

The only real defence is to stand shoulder-to-shoulder as union members to protect the way of life that we value.

Together, we need to remind the government that the only voice is not that of big business.

Together, we need to remember this has been the driving force for unions throughout history: to unite collectively to win support for a decent society and a better life for all Australians.

But we need to turn up the volume, we need to get active, and we need to bring the community with us.

Thank you.