

5 June 2014

**Gerardine (Ged) Kearney, President, Australian Council of Trade Unions,
address to ILC 2014 plenary**

I bring you greetings from the Australian union movement, a movement of nearly 2 million working Australians and their families committed to campaigning for a better life for all Australians.

We acknowledge the important role of the ILO as a tripartite body that contributes positively to lives of working people right around the world. The standards created here and adapted at regional and national levels deliver global outcomes that make our world a better place.

We live more and more in a globalised world of work.

And I note with interest the Secretary General's comments on migration, labour migration in particular which are timely and important.

Migration provides access to decent work and a better life for millions of people every year.

Australian unions have long been supporters of a robust immigration program.

Modern Australia is predominantly a nation of migrants.

Over the past 70 years migrants to Australia came from southern and eastern Europe, from south-east Asia, China, the sub-continent and most recently from Africa. They have helped shape a multicultural and progressive modern nation.

Our economic development and cultural richness could not have occurred without immigration.

Australian unions will always support a structured migration program, evenly balanced between skilled, humanitarian and family reunion schemes.

We reject unreservedly the exploitation of fear and prejudice about asylum seekers that has blighted Australian public debate over the past decade. This debate reflects poorly on both major political parties.

Australian unions reject the demonisation of people who are fleeing the most deprived and violent parts of the world for a better life in our country.

And we explicitly reject the policy of offshore processing of asylum seekers that both major parties have implemented.

Whilst we support a structured migration program we have concerns with serious flaws with the current system of temporary migration in Australia.

These arrangements have opened doors to exploitation of immigrant workers, to direct flouting of laws and labour standards, undermining the employment and skilling of Australian workers, especially our youth.

When these temporary skilled migration programs were introduced it was to fill skill gaps and to promote global cross skilling and employment enhancement.

But many employers have instead found loopholes that allow them to employ migrant workers to do unskilled jobs for substandard wages, to exploit the workers' ignorance of labour rights. Some employers have sought to buy silence and compliance with promises of permanent residency and threats of deportation. In the worst cases this has even involved forced labour

So we are pleased to see a discussion on and progress towards a new protocol updating convention 29.

Today, unemployment in Australia is rising, and our levels of youth unemployment are shameful.

Nurse graduates, carpenters, cooks, engineers, welders, fitters and motor mechanics are among the workers who tell us they are having trouble finding work. Meanwhile employers seek temporary visa workers for these positions, and the national Government is making it easier for employers to hire them.

Australia does need a skilled migration program that is planned and sustainable and takes a long term view. Where decent work opportunities are available in our growing economy we need to make them accessible to our global sisters and brothers.

If they are not sustainable and planned we risk exposing our international brothers and sisters to exploitation, we risk exacerbating social problems, and we risk the undermining of the social compact between labour, capital and state.

In Australia we face our own challenges. Our national government recently proposed sweeping and harsh measures which will hurt older and younger Australians and families, in the absence of any evidence of need for them and contrary to sound economic logic. It is keen to reduce labour regulation and worker entitlements. It will not rule out reducing the minimum wage by legislation which would affect around 1.5 million Australians and undermine our standard of living. Australian unions will meet these challenges head on.

There is a significant debate in a number of countries about the level and even the need for a minimum wage. The Australian context is evidence that a high and regularly updated minimum wage is a key element of a sustainable economy.

During the global financial crisis Australia did not go into recession due to immediate stimulus, regulation of the financial sector and, we contend, the existence of a robust minimum wage.

I am glad that global financial institutions and the ILO increasingly recognise that a minimum wage is vital to fair income distribution and a healthy economy and that this has formed part of the recurrent discussion on a sustainable economy at this ILC.

To meet the challenges facing the global economy and the world of work we truly believe that a global tripartite approach is vital. Our government has committed to such an approach to the G20, which we are proudly hosting this year in November and we are pleased that our Prime Minister may well meet with the L20 at our summit prior to the G20 leaders' meeting. We are also pleased that our government has been elected to the ILO governing body.

It is not a time for governments and employers to reduce their commitment to the ILO.

The World Bank, the IMF and the OECD must continue to recognise the critical importance of global policy coherence.

We welcome a tripartite approach because the major themes of the ILO - decent work, inclusive growth and fair migration - are vital to shaping our policy responses both domestically and internationally.

No nation is an island and what the ILO does in making the international economy work better and the world of work understandable, is vital.

thank you.