



SPEECH

**Opening address by ACTU President Ged Kearney
to the ACTU Congress 2015,
Docklands Stadium Melbourne,
Tuesday, 26 May 2015**

Delegates, welcome to ACTU Congress 2015!!!

I respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners and continuing custodians of the land on which we meet - the Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurrung language groups of the greater Kulin Nation.

Today is National Sorry Day, a day that we remember the past atrocities of government policy which controlled the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and we express our deepest sorrow for those who were forcibly removed from their families – the Stolen Generations.

Let us take this day to recognise and reiterate our commitment, and our crucial role as the trade union movement in both reconciliation and fighting for equality and a fairer Australia for all Australians.

I would also like to acknowledge the earlier generations of unionists whose dedication, commitment and sacrifice has delivered us the way of life we enjoy today.

Delegates, this is our first Congress in Melbourne for a decade, and as a Melburnian, I am, of course, biased, but I like to think this city is the spiritual home of our movement.

The ACTU has always been based here since it was first formed at a meeting in the Victorian Trades Hall building in Lygon Street in 1927.

I extend a special welcome to all the delegates attending their first ACTU Congress this week.

To them I have this advice: soak up every moment, participate in every activity you physically can, meet as many new people as possible, and make the most of the next three days.

Welcome also to the home of the Australian Football League.

Here's a little titbit to remember: this stadium seats about 50,000 spectators, making it one of the largest sporting arenas in Australia.

Yet, it would take some 36 stadiums of this size to accommodate our 1.8 million union members.

Together with their families they make at least double that number.

Remember that next time someone questions the relevance or size of the modern union movement.

Never forget that the strength of our movement lies in people.

Our opponents may have deep reserves of wealth, they may appear to control the media, but they do not have what we have: the power of almost two million direct members and tens of thousands of activists.

Australian unions are by a country mile the largest mass movement in this country – a movement that has more members than the AFL and the NRL combined.

And people power should not be underestimated.

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Delegates, over the next three days, the eyes of Australia will be upon us.

This is a place where history is made.

The union movement is not just about numbers, it is about ideas and actions.

It is here, at the ACTU Congress in 1983, that the structure of what became known as The Accord was locked into place.

It established a process that over the following years saw the ACTU working closely with the Hawke and Keating governments to deliver universal superannuation, Medicare, education and welfare reforms, and economic change and prosperity that today's generations continue to benefit from.

And it is here, 20 years later, that Greg Combet gave a rousing opening address about the need for unions to rebuild political power that grew into the Your Rights at Work campaign, which eventually played a decisive role in the ousting of WorkChoices and the Howard Government.

This year will be no different.

There are big issues and challenges ahead for our movement and the people we represent.

And isn't it funny how history repeats itself.

The social wage, which had its genesis at that ACTU Congress in 1983, is under threat from the policies of the Abbott Government.

And once again, at this Congress, we must re-commit to building a strong political campaigning infrastructure for our movement, just as we did in 2003.

This Congress is being held in a challenging environment – challenging to our living standards and our way of live, and challenging to our movement itself.

A recent report by the think tank Per Capita showed that living standards in Australia face the greatest threat in a generation, with weak wage growth, longer unpaid commuting times, the rise of insecure work and persistently high unemployment.

Workers are missing out on their share of the productivity pie with the wages share of national income at close to record lows.

The Abbott Government is charging ahead with policies that undermine jobs, public services, healthcare, education and rights.

University students, the sick, pensioners and retirees, the unemployed, young job seekers – they have all felt the brunt of the Abbott Government’s harsh and unrelenting attacks.

And just two weeks ago, they announced plans to rob working women of their paid parental leave, piling insult onto injury with disgraceful language about “double-dippers”, “fraudsters” and “rorters”.

This is a government that has never understood women and never even attempted to treat us as equals.

Employers have ramped up their push to reduce weekend penalty rates, and Eric Abetz has his Productivity Commission inquiry underway which is nothing more than a front for a second term Coalition government to go down the WorkChoices path again to individual contracts, lower wages and conditions, and less protection from unfair dismissal.

And there is that other commission – the Heydon Royal Commission – a transparent political attack to smear, distract and weaken unions so we are less of an obstacle to their goal of an Australia that delivers what the business lobby wants.

There are also the challenges of the continuing spread of insecure work and the disruption to the patterns of work caused by the digital revolution.

Here, over the next three days, we will meet those challenges head on, and we will agree on a plan to go forward.

We will do that, as long as we remember who we are and why we do what we do.

And the values we stand for as Australian unions.

The same values that are embedded in our national consciousness: fairness, decency, equality. And not just in the workplace, but everywhere.

A nation where everyone has fundamental rights and equal opportunity, 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.

We are all here because of the same thing.

We all became involved in the union movement for the same reasons.

We stepped up because we believe in an Australia that should deliver a better life for everyone, not just a privileged few.

We are dedicated to equality and justice.

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

I get around the country a fair bit, and speak to thousands of workers every year.

But every once in a while, you hear something that makes you stop and think.

Something that sends a tingle up your spine.

I had one of those moments recently when I spoke at a conference for one of our affiliates, the CPSU.

As you all know, the public sector has suffered massive job cuts over the past two years, and union members are currently embroiled in a bitter dispute with Eric Abetz, who is refusing to give them a real pay rise unless they trade off a raft of rights and conditions.

So it was a pretty grim meeting and after I spoke, a man stood up – he was a public servant - and he looked at me and he said in voice quivering with emotion and pride: “Ged, there are some of here who have not taken industrial action for 30 years, but if Eric Abetz wants a fight, he’s got a fight on his hands”.

There was hardly a dry eye in the house, because this man knew that he wasn’t alone in demanding some dignity and respect at work.

He has tens of thousands of mates alongside him in the union.

And that’s what unions are about: empowering ordinary people to stand up and come together and take action to demand and secure a better future.

Today, at the same time as we are meeting down here in Melbourne, the Heydon Royal Commission will be sitting in their dismal, empty windowless room up in Sydney, desperately trying to create another headline about – inverted quotes – “union corruption”.

Well, I say, try all you like.

But the public has made up their minds, and they know a political show trial when they see one.

We’ll be around a long time after the royal commission is over and Tony Abbott and Eric Abetz are gone.

And we will still be campaigning for the things we have always fought for because the majority of Australians support unions and know that unionism has been a force for good in this country, and when the chips are down, it will be the union movement that will be in their corner defending their way of life and seeking to improve it.

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We have a proud history of achievements to fall back on and the ACTU Congress is a celebration of these achievements.

But it also where we vow to build on those achievements and that history and map out a path for the way forward.

For our movement and for all Australian workers and their families.

I’m very excited about this Congress; we have a vibrant and diverse agenda ahead of us over the next three days.

Later this morning, we will officially launch a new umbrella campaign for our movement, the campaign to fight for our living standards that we will take to the next federal election.

At lunch time today, I am looking forward very much to hearing Rosie Batty and Tanya Plibersek speak at the women's lunch.

Rosie is a deserving Australian of the Year, a woman of great courage and dignity.

Her work on domestic violence is making a difference, and we are delighted that she has agreed to address us.

Unions are also doing important work on domestic violence, and later at Congress affiliates will be asked to endorse the next steps in a family and domestic violence policy that has already been adopted in workplaces with 1.6 million employees through collective bargaining.

Tomorrow will be bookended by speeches from the man we hope will be the next Prime Minister of Australia, Bill Shorten, and a woman who has nothing but the greatest respect from all of us, Australia's first woman Prime Minister, Julia Gillard.

And on Thursday, there will be a very interesting international panel discussion, followed by a satellite address from someone we all know and admire, the economist and former US Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich.

In between these highlights will be the policy workshops, where the real grunt work will take place on developing our policy agenda – not only what we want to achieve, but the maps for how we will achieve it.

There is much on our plate and this year the policy agenda has been divided into two streams: workers' rights and a fair go for all.

These policies will not just be discussed here and then sit on a shelf for three years gathering dust.

They will form the basis of a real action plan for our movement going forward and I can promise you we will pursue that agenda with all the vigour of our great campaigns of the past.

And we need to have conversations about these great issues in their millions with workmates, neighbours friends and families.

Conversations that convince Australians that our living standards and way of life are worth fighting for.

And that, whether Labor or the Liberals are at the helm, we need a new social compact that continues to deliver a fair distribution of national wealth for all Australians.

A new social compact for the new economy and the workforce of the future.

We will debate how to respond to Coalition attacks on health and safety and workers' compensation, organising young workers, strengthening the retirement system, and ending the roting and exploitation that has become a feature of the temporary migrant worker schemes.

Measures to make the big end of town and the very wealthy pay their fair share of tax, affordable health care and quality education for all, climate change, respect and economic security for

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and a rights-based approach to refugees and asylum seekers will all be debated.

The importance of industry planning, growing jobs, the future of work, and meeting the challenges of the digital revolution will never be far from discussion.

And of course we will be discussing those things central to fairness at work.

Issues like penalty rates, the minimum wage and the safety net; modernising our IR system to take into account insecure forms of work, including regulation of labour hire and portable entitlements; a fairer bargaining system and rights to representation; work, life and family, including parental leave, the right to request flexible arrangements and domestic violence leave.

On many of these issues, we will be in agreement.

On some, we will have different views.

But let's have those arguments and those debates here at the ACTU Congress.

Don't be shy, because a contest of ideas is a sign of a healthy movement.

But delegates when we do have those debates I urge every one of you to think beyond your own workplaces and even your own unions.

Think about what good public policy means and what a broader, progressive agenda requires of us as a movement

Because I ask you delegates, "If not us - then who?"

The ACTU Congress is never only about listening to speakers and participating in policy discussions.

I want you to come out of this Congress motivated for the fight ahead, proud of the movement you belong to, and informed about our strategies to build a better future.

And think about the responsibility you have to your fellow members as a delegate at this Congress, and what you will want to report back to your unions and what new knowledge you will have to share.

Make the most of every opportunity you have to connect with members from unions other than your own – whether you are a truckie, a teacher, a wharfie, or a plumber, whether you work in an aluminium smelter, an aged care facility, a poultry factory, a call centre or an iron ore mine – we are all part of the same movement with the same common goals.

Congress is about about forming relationships and networks and building a common sense of purpose.

In a few moments you will hear from Dave Oliver, and before you do, I want to acknowledge the incredible effort he has put in over the past three years as Secretary of the ACTU.

It has not been easy.

Dave has been forced to restructure and re-align the priorities and resources of the ACTU to strengthen it as the peak campaigning force for our movement.

He has been buffeted by the royal commission, the Productivity Commission and attacks from the Abbott Government along the way.

He has had to make hard decisions, and some of them have not been popular.

But having worked with Dave, I know he is someone who will never shirk from a challenge, and he is someone who has the interests of the ACTU, the union movement, and working people at the heart of everything he does.

I am delighted that Dave is seeking re-election, and look forward to continuing with him in a team with our two Assistant Secretaries, Michael Borowick, and Scott Connolly.

And I too will be seeking your endorsement for another term as ACTU President.

Every day I feel privileged to be the head of this great movement of ours as the voice of working people.

With your blessing, this will be my third term as President of the ACTU, a pinnacle I never in my wildest dreams aspired to when I first joined the Australian Nursing Federation as a trainee nurse in 1985.

But you know, in other ways I feel as I did that day: I have always believed in the power of the collective, the solidarity of a union, as the greatest force for change not only in our workplaces but in our society.

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

And we will achieve great things at this ACTU Congress.

Thank you.