



SPEECH

**Opening address by ACTU Secretary Dave Oliver
to the ACTU Congress 2015,
Docklands Stadium Melbourne,
Tuesday, 26 May 2015**

Delegates I want to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to elders past and present.

I also want to recognise National Sorry Day and I want to say this always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Now I want to welcome you all.

We have unionists from all over Australia and all over the global with us for the next three days. So whether you come from Cairns or Cape Town or Penrith or Perth or Darwin or Daylesford I want to congratulate everyone on making the effort for being here for the 2015 Congress because this is a vital moment for our movement

There are significant challenges that are confronting us at the moment.

We have a hostile government in Canberra that is hell-bent on trying to sideline us.

We are now seeing extreme growth or growing inequality.

We've got the impact of exponential growth of digital technologies combined with globalisation that is having significant displacement across industries. Such as the transport industry with what we've seen happen with Uber, or the accommodation sector with AirBnB, or the finance industry with automation and peer to peer lending, and in the manufacturing industry with 3D printing or now 4D printing.

And now for the first time since the Second World War, the manufacturing industry is employing below one million people.

We also have to confront the changing nature of work.

At the last Congress we launched a report into insecure jobs. We identified the different classifications of employment. We recognised the mode of casual, part time, contractors, fixed term or that oxymoron – a permanent casual.

But we have a new class of workers now, known as the 'liquid workforce' or workers who are on zero hour contracts or workers that are now having to bid for parcels of work on a digital cloud, in an EBay-type reverse auction where the lowest bidder wins and obviously the worker loses.

And the challenge for us and governments today and into the future is how you are going to regulate this?

How are we going to regulate working conditions, hours of work, rates of pay, workers comp, health and safety, superannuation?

These are going to be real challenges for us.

We've also seen the emergence of what can be described as monolithic empires, with the growth of Google, Microsoft, Apple, and Instagram; where they are contributing to growing inequality.

An example I like to use, if you take Sony and Snapchat.

Sony is worth \$18 billion. Sony has operations all around the globe. They have offices, they have factories. They have tens of thousands of employees working for them, and the wealth from that company trickles down and distributes among those communities.

Whereas Snapchat is worth \$19 billion who could fit their entire operation – plant, equipment, machinery, technology, employees all under this roof. Instead of getting trickle-down effect, we are now getting a trickle up, and the wealth is not being distributed. More money at the top, less at the bottom and that's a significant challenge for us.

In 1967, Prime Minister Harold Holt said that he knew no other free country where what is produced by the community is more fairly and evenly distributed among the community.

Well unfortunately that's not the case today.

Recent OECD figures show that Australia is now the 11th most unequal of the 34 OECD members. In this country, the nine richest people have a fortune that equates to the bottom 20% of the country.

So we're pleased that on the third day of this Congress we'll have Robert Reich addressing us.

Robert served as Secretary of Labour in the first Clinton administration, and he has been a big advocate for change to address growing inequality and I'm really looking forward to his contribution.

It also comes as no surprise that recent reports that have come out from the International Monetary Fund has shown that there is a direct relationship between growing inequality and declining union density.

That's why it's important in any campaign, any consideration of how we go forward, we have to look at organising new ways to grow. And in doing that to meet these challenges we have to look at innovation. We have to look at ways to exploit new technologies.

Now it used to be that a Kodak moment captured a happy moment.

Now Kodak is a symbol of what happens when you fail to innovate.

It's a little known fact, that in 1974 Kodak, in their laboratories developed the first digital camera or digital photography, and for whatever reason the management decided not to act on it. They

decided to stick with film when the world went digital.

Now I was there, I was there, ten years ago in the northern suburbs here in Melbourne, when Kodak shut their last remaining factory. Shut their doors forever.

I was there to watch those workers lose their jobs. I saw the impact it had.

And they lost their jobs and they lost their livelihoods because the people that they trusted to run the enterprise refused to innovate.

I know that the Australian Union movement will not have that Kodak moment.

I know we won't stay stuck in the past while the rest of the world changes around us and that we will innovate.

And later today there will be a workshop looking at this issue about unions in the new economy, and it will look at it in two prisms.

One is how do we regulate the type of employment I've spoken about, and secondly how do we as a movement exploit that technology and use that as a means to organise people into our movement.

Because we know by building our movement, we build our power.

By coming together by uniting, we build power.

Over the next two days we will be considering our plan for the "Build a Better Future" campaign.

And I will be asking the Congress to support the plan and in doing so support the resources that are needed to deliver it.

As I travel the country and I talk to workers, they tell me they are worried.

They tell me they're worried about their jobs.

They tell me they're worried about the future for their children.

They tell me they're worried about wages and conditions.

They tell me they're about the attacks on their living standards.

They're worried about growing inequality, and this is in their words, not mine.

They are worried about the Americanisation of our country.

Where going to the doctor depends on the depth of your pockets, or you have to mortgage your house to send your children to university, or owning your home is not a dream but a fantasy.

And delegates, in this country we have a government that is fostering inequality.

We have a government that has no plans for jobs.

We have a government that is taking a wrecking ball to the social wage.

And what we saw on the last two budgets that this government handed down, no one was left untouched - the vulnerable, the sick, the aged, the unemployed, students, pensioners and the public sector.

And once again this government is going after workers' rights.

Not a week goes by when we don't have someone from the business community or the Coalition wanting to bemoan the fact the minimum wage in this country is too high.

Not a week goes by when we don't have someone from the business community wanting to attack penalty rates.

We had the spectacle over the Easter break with Kate Carnell Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry that launched a campaign over Easter asking small business to put a sign on their door apologising for having to close because they couldn't afford to pay penalty rates.

Well we countered that. We produced our own sign with a heart saying "we love penalty rates" and many businesses put those signs up and we smashed Kate Carnell's campaign out of the park.

No our opponents, like Kate Carnell want to paint a picture that we now live 24/7 economy.

Well I'll buy that, I'll buy the argument we live in a 24/7 society and therefore we should trade off our penalty rates if we can start sending our children to school on the weekend, or our major sporting events are held during the week or Parliament sits on a weekend. Because until then we won't buy it, we'll still continue to fight for penalty rates.

And if business community want to come after worker's wages and conditions. If they want to come after the minimum wage, if they want to come after penalty rates, well I'm here to tell you now you've got one hell of a fight on your hands.

And every day, everyday we are out there fighting for a better future and I want to take this opportunity to congratulate.

I want to congratulate the public sector workers, who, for first time in over 30 years, have been involved in industrial action to fight for job security, better pay and conditions.

I want to congratulate our truckies who are standing up for safe rates to end carnage on our roads.

The NUW are standing up for migrant workers.

Manufacturing workers who are standing up for the shipbuilding industry,

Our nurses who are fighting for universal health care.

Our maritime union who are fighting for fuel security and local jobs.

The AWU for reserving our gas.

The childcare unions fighting for a better deal for our childcare workers

And the hospitality and retail sector fighting for minimum wages and penalty rates.

And the construction industry unions fighting to make sure every construction worker comes home in one piece.

I also, too, want to thank and recognise the terrific work of our peak councils.

SA Unions that kept the Liberals out, the Victorian Trades Hall Council and the Queensland Council of Unions who came together and kicked out a rotten Liberal government after one term, fantastic job.

And Unions NSW who've put us one step closer for next time round.

I also want to thank the education unions for running a terrific campaign over the last few years that has put the issue of school funding front and centre in any kind of consideration of government policy.

And I am so pleased that this Congress will no doubt pass a resolution moved and seconded by IEU and the AEU for the whole movement to back this Gonski campaign in, you'll have the whole movement backing you in on this campaign.

* * *

Now the other message I want to give employers is, if you want to engage constructively and if you want to engage with us on the high road where we can talk about productivity, we want to talk about innovation, skills, investment in infrastructure and quality jobs, we will engage.

But if they want to try and take this down the low road about cutting wages and conditions, well, we will fight.

And it is disappointing that we have a government in place that doesn't encourage collaboration.

They've dismantled all the tripartite bodies where unions sat in a room with government and employers and worked our way through significant issues.

They've disengaged with workers and their representatives.

Now we saw it happen last time they were in office between 1996 and 2007. They took an ideological approach and disengaged with the union movement and over that 11 year period we had a decade of decline.

Now Ged spoke earlier about the Your Rights at Work campaign

And valuable lessons have been learnt about that campaign.

The Coalition have learnt that they made a mistake.

Their mistake was that they went after workers' wages and conditions first and they underestimated the power of organised labour.

They underestimated the power of us combining with the community to take up the fight which not only saw them lose office but we took out their beloved Prime Minister John Winston Howard as well.

So they've learnt from that.

That is why now they are trying to sideline us, trying to take us out of the picture.

That is why they've got a \$60m Royal Commission which can only be described as a political witch-hunt designed to do two things – drain our resources and to try to damage our reputation

That is why they have a raft of legislation in place designed to diminish the capacity of our movement to get out there, to organise and to campaign.

Because they want to make sure that we can't do to them what we did in 2007.

Well I've got some bad news for you Tony, because we will do it again.

On top of this they've got a Productivity Commission Inquiry into the IR laws. We know everything up for grabs minimum wages, penalty rates, shift loadings, unfair dismissal, Long Service Leave, job security, individual contracts.

And it confirmed what we already knew, because the minute they announced this inquiry, we said that the Productivity Commission was going to be a Trojan horse to deliver WorkChoices mark two. And looking at this it will be WorkChoices mark two on steroids.

Now we've also learnt our lesson from the Your Rights at Work campaign. We learnt that we made a significant mistake. We made a significant mistake that after the 2007 election we dismantled all the campaigning infrastructure that we had built up over the years

And we literally went from overnight from a campaigning movement to a transactional movement and that is why the plan we will be putting forward is not only about building our campaigning capacity it's about keeping it.

And I'll make you this promise, as long as I'm here; we will not make that mistake again.

We have a three year plan. Over that three year period there will be one federal election, three state elections and two territory elections.

And if Tony Abbott wants to bring on an early election, well we'll be ready and Tony if you want to bring it on, bring it on, because we're ready to go.

And during this campaign we'll campaign on our issues, irrespective of who is in government.

Any like campaign there is a bunch of stuff we are campaigning against, but there's going to be a whole lot of issues that we are campaigning for

And it is incumbent on us as a movement to be able to articulate an alternate vision that's why at this Congress we'll be looking at six key pillars.

We'll be looking at rights at work and secure jobs.

We'll be looking at universal health care.

We'll be looking at the highest quality education for all.

We'll be looking at public services owned by everyone, for everyone.

We'll be looking at secure retirement, decent pensions, adequate superannuation.

And we'll be after a fair go for all, where we can provide help for those that need it and everyone pays fair share, including multinationals who don't pay their tax.

Delegates, this campaign is about building a better future and we are going to fight for our living standards

But this fight can't be won in individual workplaces.

This fight cannot be won by individual unions.

This fight cannot be won by individual industry by industry approaches.

It can only be won if we come together as a movement.

Collectivism that's a great idea, terrific concept, because we know there's power in the collective, that's what we're about.

That's why I'm proudly putting myself forward along with our highly talented and competent, beloved President Ged Kearney and my two dedicated Assistant Secretaries Scott and Michael to lead this fight.

And I will be asking this Congress to back the plan and the resources needed to see it through.

Because delegates if we're serious about growing the movement, if we're serious about changing governments, if we're serious about fighting for our living standards, well this Congress needs to back the plan and the policies to build a better future.

So I look forward to engaging you over the next three days for our Congress.

Thanks very much.