

AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION

2007 FEDERAL CONFERENCE

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SPEECH

I would like to thank Pat, Angelo, Darcel and Susan for the opportunity to address your Federal conference.

I was interested in the title of your conference "a new deal for Australia's future".

We need a new deal for Australia's working families.

A new deal must go beyond industrial relations to all of the factors that create a decent and fair society.

This includes accepting our responsibility as a sovereign nation to send troops to war only in the most extreme circumstances.

The original architect of the "New Deal" was Franklin D. Roosevelt arguably the greatest US President of modern times.

Roosevelt was criticised by the Right for introducing communism to the United States through his New Deal and by the Left as saving capitalism from its inevitable demise.

Regardless of these criticisms Roosevelt's principles and passion would be a welcome addition to American and Australian contemporary politics.

In 1936 Roosevelt said the following:

I have seen war. I have seen war on land and sea.

I have seen blood running from the wounded. I have seen men coughing out their gassed lungs.

I have seen the dead in the mud. I have seen cities destroyed.

I have seen 200 limping, exhausted men come out of the line -- the survivors of a regiment of 1000 that went forward 48 hours before.

I have seen children starving. I have seen the agony of mothers and wives.

I hate war.

I have passed unnumbered hours, I shall pass unnumbered hours thinking and planning how war may be kept from this nation.

We need a Roosevelt in the United States and we need John Howard to recognise the reality of war.

Subjugating our independence to the Bush administration is stupid, immoral and reprehensible.

Roosevelt's New Deal used the power and influence of government to create jobs, alleviate suffering and build a new future for the United States.

A "New Deal" is therefore a fitting theme for this conference.

Where are the Roosevelt's of modern politics?

Where are the politicians of courage principle and vision?

In most English-speaking countries the working class and their unions are under immense political attack and pressure.

The "market" had deepened its grip on society to the detriment of workers around the world.

We are treated as individuals, and consumers as distinct from participants in a society which should care for each other.

Neo liberalism is the dominant example of the political economy at work.

It is not the only example.

Other approaches, values, and principles can be applied to the economy.

It is up to the trade union movement and progressive politicians to build and articulate a real alternative to Howard's agenda.

As Neal Lawson the chair of the British think tank Compass said recently

"If politicians only exist to serve the interests of the free market then what is the point of swapping one set of managers for another?"

This is the dilemma for Australians.

There has not been a real political alternative prepared to serve the interests of society and balance the needs of the community against the pressures of globalisation.

Both major parties seem to be content to serve the market and hope that the market delivers for ordinary Australians.

We have had 10 wasted years under the Howard government.

We have not used the proceeds of the mineral boom to diversify our economy or improve public health and education

The Howard government has focused on market fundamentalism.

The issues of social justice, quality of life, mutual responsibilities, democratic accountability and environmental sustainability have been excluded or neglected.

10 years of Howard has left us a poorer, meaner and more isolated society.

Our society and our economy are being constructed to serve the needs of big business rather than the social and human needs of working class Australians.

My members are just keeping their head above water.

My members are struggling to meet their commitments.

My members are facing increasing debt.

My members are not sharing in the wealth created through the exploitation of Australia's natural resources.

My members are more insecure in their jobs.

How do we change this, how do we deal with the massive challenges facing the trade union movement.

These challenges are not confined to the workplace and they include:

- The massive power of the Australian media to influence and brainwash workers in the interests of the rich and powerful. US v Europe: ALP radicals (Carr and Gillard)
- The implementation of the neoliberal agenda based on the Washington consensus of privatisation/balanced budgets/competition policy/low taxes, free trade.
- The shifting of funding from our public health and education systems to the private systems based on profiteering, greed, and executive excesses.
- The use of public-private partnerships to balance budgets and shift debt and responsibility to future generations.
- Terrorism
- Global warming
- Racism
- Legislation designed to destroy the trade union movement.

Politics is actually about the day-to-day decisions that affect our society.

We must fight to gain more control over our lives and the issues that matter.

We are told that we are classless society, that working families are "aspirational".

It is not something new for the working class to be aspirational.

My members have aspirations for themselves and their families; this does not mean that they must conform to Howard's narrow vision for Australia.

Regardless of the scale of the challenges, the union movement is fighting back.

We have mobilised hundreds of thousands of workers on three separate occasions to send a message to Howard and big business that we will not accept their unfair and extreme industrial legislation.

The "Your Rights at Work" campaign has been extremely successful.

We must continue the fight right up to the next collection and beyond if necessary.

I was extremely fortunate to participate in the ACTU over seas delegation to examine the industrial systems of a number of countries.

My only regret was that we did not spend sufficient time in northern Europe looking at real alternatives to the American system of isolated enterprise bargaining.

Nevertheless the recommendations of the delegation combine many of the strengths of our traditional Australian industrial system with the industrial realities facing our members in a globalised and aggressively competitive world.

The recommendations adopted by the ACTU congress will:

- Create a system based on fairness, equity, and respect for the rights of working people.
- Move to meeting our obligations under International Labour Organisation conventions.
- Provide workers access to conciliation and arbitration where necessary.
- Remove restrictions on the issues workers can bargain over.
- Provide for industry and pattern bargaining.
- Provide rights and protections for delegates and activists.
- Ensure decent unfair dismissal rights for all workers.
- Remove the rights of employers to enforce individual contracts.
- Ensure collective agreements cannot be undermined by individual contracts.
- Provided for a sensible, efficient and effective balloting process if the views of workers have to be tested.
- Improve productive performance based on respect and cooperation.

There will be a number of challenges for the trade union movement to deliver this agenda.

Obviously the key challenge is to defeat the Howard government at the next election and have the ALP implement the ACTU policy.

In my view this will require a total commitment from every activist in the country to work tirelessly for the defeat of Howard.

This will mean political activism at the enterprise and in the broader community.

The ACTU executive has developed and implemented one of the most sophisticated political campaigns ever seen in this country.

A combination of industrial activism, rallies, polling, focus groups, marginal seat campaigning will deliver significant political change.

There has been some criticism of the numbers attending the last rally and the so called "failure" to fill the MCG.

Let me say this, no one can challenge the commitment to this campaign from the Victorian unions and the trades Hall Council.

It is not a failure to mobilise 60,000 workers to attend a morning rally at the MCG.

There would be few other, if any, political or community organisations who could match our mobilisation.

Many thousands of workers stopped work but did not attend the rally. This is a tactical challenge that we must consider carefully and rectify the next time we mobilise.

The AMWU will be supporting a further mass mobilisation of workers before the next election.

Every time we mobilise we bring to the attention of the Australian public the unfairness the extremism and the inequities of these laws.

Each time we mobilise we dominate the media for approximately 3 days and we raise the understanding of the community to the challenges facing working families as a result of Howard's attack on workers rights.

It will not be sufficient to concentrate solely on marginal seat campaigning even though I agree it is absolutely crucial to effectively campaign in the marginal seats.

It will not be sufficient to spend millions of dollars on media advertising unless this is backed up by mobilisation.

Part of the mobilisation of workers is their political education.

When the AMWU and the AEU deliver tens of thousands of members to rallies around the country our organisers delegates, and activists have to talk to members, convince members and mobilise members to defy Howard's laws.

Workers have been extremely courageous in defying the laws and we need to provide continued leadership and determination.

If we provide leadership then workers will support us.

They know these laws are bad laws and must be opposed.

I have attended rallies in Tasmania, Albury, and Victoria. There is a huge ground swell of support for our campaign and we should not sell ourselves short.

This is a fight for the future.

It is a fight for a decent society based on fairness and equity and respect.

It is a fight for our own rights and the rights for future generations.

My wife Elaine and I have a 16 month-old granddaughter Amy.

Amy is our first grandchild and like all grandparents we love her so much and we want so much for her.

She is a beautiful young child.

We have aspirations for Amy.

We want her to succeed in the same way as our two daughters who were educated at Muswellbrook primary school and St Clair high school

Both of our daughters have degrees and successful careers.

What if Amy is not academically gifted?

What if Amy cannot be a lawyer, doctor, teacher, rocket scientist or brain surgeon?

What if Amy has to work, like many Australians, in a low paid job?

Under Howard's legislation she will have no rights.

Under Howard's legislation she will not be treated with respect.

Under Howard's legislation she can be dismissed for operational reasons.

Under Howard's legislation her life will be tougher and less fair.

This is unacceptable to me and I know is unacceptable to you and your aspirations for your kids and your grandkids.

Let's continue this fight.

We can win this fight.

Howard has gone too far he has destroyed the historic Australian social contract and has put his business mates before the Australian public.

He will pay a price for this at the next election.

Thank you.