

AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION

2007 FEDERAL CONFERENCE

FRED VAN LEEUWEN

SPEECH

Colleagues,

Firstly, it is a great pleasure to join you again at the AEU's Federal Conference. AEU, and its predecessor ATF, have played a special role in international work, globally and in the Asia/Pacific region. You were among the earliest advocates for the creation of Education International 14 years ago. You were in fact, among the most consistent and determined advocates of international teacher union unity.

The track record since EI was founded in January 1993 shows that we were right to take that historic step together. We know that solidarity through EI works, we know that it must be kept alive and that it must be nurtured. If we want democracy and social justice to globalize like our economies have, if we want to prevent the world from being governed solely by the dictates of so-called free markets and trade agreements, we must hold on to that concept. In this respect I would like to thank you for your involvement in our solidarity work. You are helping us to assist our colleagues in other parts of the Asian-Pacific region and you are providing valuable leadership for the work of our International.

Today almost ninety percent of all teachers' organisations worldwide belong to our International. This makes us one of the largest and most representative non governmental bodies in the international community.

In July this year, EI will hold its 4th World Congress. It will be in Berlin, near where the Wall once epitomized the division between East and West, and the repression of liberty. The Wall that fell in 1989! Our theme will be *"Educators joining together for quality education and social justice"*. Let us look together at the theme in the context of Australia's place in the global community.

QUALITY EDUCATION

There is a general consensus – among governments, employers and the trade union movement – that education is the key to each nation's future in the global economy, and that education is the key to each individual's chances for a better life. But many politicians and business leaders are preaching that globalization means you have to be more competitive, and being more competitive means you have to deregulate. We remind them however that education is not only, not even first of all, an economic tool. By education we mean literacy, the ability to calculate, and preparing for working life, but we also mean something more. We mean education to be a citizen, an actor in society, a participant, to have a say in your own future, to be able to assert your rights while respecting the rights of others. And quality public education is built upon certain values – universal values of understanding and tolerance.

For our school systems to be successful in promoting dialogue and universal values they must be open, democratic, and publicly funded. They must operate under the supervision of democratically elected authorities. This does not mean that the State or Education Ministers should dictate what and how we teach. On the contrary, while we accept our governments to set the parameters for our education systems, for our work, we are the ones who have the expertise and the professional responsibility to prepare our young people for adult life, including the world of work.

Resources

Even though no-one contests that investment in education pays off for countries and individuals, Australia ranks among the lower half of the OECD countries in per capita education expenditure. And here is the really significant piece. **Public** investment, ie government expenditure, in Australia is **very** low. **Private** input into education in Australia is higher than almost all other OECD countries. Only two – the United States and Korea – have a higher rate of private input, and in both those cases that is principally because higher education is financed mainly by private input in the form of endowments or fees. In the case of Australia, private input is higher for primary and secondary education. And this has consequences for equity.

We have evidence from 67 countries on the equity of the outcomes of education systems, drawn from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA reveals marked differences among countries. Finland and Canada are both high performers but their results are also more **equitable** than most other countries. Students differ in achievement but not because of their social backgrounds. On the other hand, the results for Australia and Germany reveal substantial inequity: differences in school performance among students reflect marked differences in their social background. Disadvantaged students in Australia fall about 1½ years behind their counterparts in Finland.

The role of the public and private sectors

We are aware of the ongoing debates here in Australia about the input of the Federal versus the State governments. 30 years ago, teachers and parents in Australia made the big break- through of achieving Federal funding to improve resources for State schools. But what do we see today, 30 years further down the track? We see that 68% of Australian students attend public schools, but only 35% of Federal Government funding goes to public schools. Colleagues, when you look at the figures, it is apparent that your Federal Government has become principally a funder of private schooling in Australia! The figures show that trend dates back exactly 10 years. Surprised? If public schools had the same share of Federal funds as they had in 1996, they would have had **1 billion dollars** in resources more than they get today. Then, like the US Federal Government your Federal Government sets national standards. So it takes resources away from public schools, put them into private schools, and then says "meet our national standards"!

There's more. The Australian model of fees for higher education is being exported to other countries. By the way, labour governments have been promoting this too, and a former Australian Labour Minister for Education was promoting university fees in Ireland last year. There are strikes in Greece over this issue as we talk, with the University teachers being supported by EI's affiliates in primary and secondary education.

You see the point. There is a common pattern of downgrading the public sector, and pumping up the private sector, that includes transferring massive resources from public to private, and that is driven essentially by ideology. We might ask, does the evidence back this ideologically driven shift of resources? According to the OECD *there is no significant overall superiority of non-government schooling in any country.*

And there's more. The fashionable trend today is Public Private Partnerships – PPPs. PPPs will be promoted at the World Economic Forum in Davos next week. Australia has been among the leading governmental advocate of PPPs. And Australia has become one of the biggest sellers of educational services to overseas students. In international meetings, we get the impression that top officials from your Federal Department of Education and Training are there to promote a business, not to promote education, and certainly not to promote equity.

Teachers

Colleagues, Quality public education requires quality teachers. That means well prepared, qualified teachers with proper terms and conditions of employment. The right to education is the right to a qualified teacher. We know however that we face looming teacher shortages. UNESCO has just completed and published a report showing that if our political leaders do not act fast, nine years from now the world will be short of 18 million primary school teachers, 13 million in the low income countries, 5 million in the industrial economies. This may be the most serious challenge our profession has ever faced.

[South and West Asia will need to raise their current teaching forces by 7% and create another 325,000 teaching posts in less than a decade. For Afghanistan to achieve universal primary education by 2015 it will need to hire 9% more teachers every year. India will need the greatest inflow of new teachers in the world – more than two million.

[A frightening scenario is unfolding in low income countries facing serious teachers' shortages. Unqualified persons are filling teachers' positions, education quality suffers, the best qualified teachers go into private education, with resources that expand as public resources decline. Or they go abroad.... Although we support the right of every teacher to seek employment in another country, we must strongly oppose the poaching of qualified teachers by employment agencies from the UK, the United States and other rich countries. A new Commonwealth Protocol on Teachers Recruitment has been agreed by our Commonwealth member unions and their governments. The International Labour Organization has now agreed, at our urging, to use this protocol and to establish its standards worldwide.]

The evidence available shows that the majority of governments are applying two strategies: the intensification of the workload of teachers already in service in developed countries, and the mass-scale engagement of unqualified personnel with even less provisions into teaching, in developing countries. Australian teacher shortages will mean large class sizes and less time for students with special need. In a report that we submitted to the ILO and UNESCO a few months ago we recommended two lines of action. First, Governments must pay more attention to the training, recruitment and retention of qualified teachers. Secondly, the teaching profession must be made more attractive. When, in low income countries, average primary school teachers' salaries have declined over the last 25 years, that is a sad commentary on short-sighted public policies.

[According to international comparative surveys about income levels in various professions worldwide, such as the UBS study "Prices and Earnings Around the Globe in 2003", primary school teachers' remuneration, expressed in terms of purchasing power parity, compares unfavourably with most of surveyed 13 professions in the 70 largest cities in the world.

In our report to ILO and UNESCO, we pointed to the growing phenomenon of violence in schools and attacks on academic freedom and tenure for teachers. We also stressed that **Gender equity** remains a critically important issue particularly with respect to pay, violence against women teachers and discrimination in employment.

We also pointed out that, too often, teacher organisations are not included in **consultations and negotiations concerning education reforms**. Paradoxically, the situation is better at international level, where EI is invited to participate in all major forums where education is discussed, such as the EU, OECD and UNESCO, actively and inclusively representing the interests of its members. We strongly believe that such social dialogue and partnership is the "glue" of successful education reforms. EI promotes that view repeatedly wherever governments meet, regionally or internationally.

Colleagues, the key to the future in Australia, as in other countries, is dialogue and engagement with partners of civil society including the education unions. The systematic rejection of dialogue has proven to be sterile and unproductive. It is through dialogue and engagement with civil society that we can build better education, and a better world.

The world knows you have a particular problem in Australia. A decade ago, education unions were acknowledged as Partners In Education Reform. But since then, to say that your Federal Government has kept education unions at arm's length would be the understatement of the decade! Why? Such a stance is not in the interests of the people who work in education, who we represent, nor in the interests of the children and young people we teach. There is no rationale for such a stance, except for a purely ideological one.

The visceral and ideological antipathy of your government towards trade unions has of course become clear for all to see in the laws that have been brought in to prevent unions from carrying out their normal functions of representing people who work for a living. For 100 years, since the federation of Australia in 1901, your country had been considered world-wide as one of the models in terms of respect for fundamental labour rights. No longer is that the case. When the ILO lists the countries where fundamental labour rights are systematically violated, Australia is unfortunately one of them.

Let me make it very clear. Australia's federal laws on workplace relations are in violation of international labour standards and of conventions that Australia has signed, ratified and committed to respect. These laws are anti-democratic, for they are designed to take away the rights of ordinary working people, and to strengthen the powers of those who run the economy for their own benefit.

It is striking to see that the period when Australia moved steadily away from social dialogue and social partnership coincides with a period of increase in inequity. In the country that once prided itself on equality of opportunity, a widening gap has opened between rich and poor. And, as we have just seen, that gap is also reflected in education.

Let me just say that a lot of people will be watching the outcome of your federal elections this year, and let me not beat around the bush – a lot of us believe that your country, and its citizens, deserve a change!

Globalization

Today, we know that the livelihood of every working family is affected by the global changes sweeping our economies. No sector of production or provider of services is spared. And no country is isolated. The global economy is a **fact**. The information and communication revolution is a **fact**. Global transport and movements of peoples are **facts**. It is not a question of being for or against globalisation – it is about what sort of globalisation we want. Globalisation has meant, inevitably, movements of peoples, and those who advocate 'law of the jungle' globalisation have ignored the consequences of those movements, the impact on schools and health services, not to mention jobs. But they have also shirked their responsibilities to ensure public resources for our schools. They use globalisation to avoid tax, instead of building up our public services. All governments feel these pressures.

Migration

The diversity of the world has now come into each of our national societies, into each of our local communities. A country of immigrants like Australia has an advantage in the global community of the 21st century, because you began to confront the challenges of building a multicultural society earlier. You have also recognized the rights and role of the Indigenous people who were there before the immigrants, and Australia has played a leading role in international mobilization by Indigenous peoples from over 70 countries around the world.

I come from a country – the Netherlands - that was historically one of **emigration**. Today, the former emigrant countries have to address the same issues of multiculturalism as the countries of historical **immigration**. So do the former colonial powers – Britain, France and Germany. So do the other industrialized countries – Italy, the Scandinavians, Japan. There is simply no member country of the OECD (except perhaps Iceland) where immigration is not an issue.

The reaction to this reality is sometimes frightening. Anti-immigrant political movements have developed across the OECD countries – from Denmark to Austria to Britain, France and Italy. So-called mainstream political parties are jockeying to recuperate the slogans of the demagogues. We know you have had the experience of a government playing cynically on anti-immigrant sentiments for electoral gain.

Nor is the issue of diversity restricted to movements from the South to the North. There are movements of populations across all the borders of Africa, Latin America, the Middle-East, Asia and the Pacific.

The demagogues would play on fear and the rejection of those who are different. As educators, we must recognize the richness that comes from embracing human diversity. Vicious cycles of extremism and exclusion, now threaten us not just locally or even nationally, but globally. With slogans dating back to medieval times, but using the technologies of the internet and mobile 'phones, a deadly conflict has emerged and the world is fearful.

As educators, as citizens, we must dare to *imagine* together a better world – a world of justice and fairness and decency, of understanding between cultures and peoples, of respect for fundamental rights and freedoms, and above all for human dignity. EI has a responsibility to play its part in developing a vision of the world – based not on building barriers of ignorance but on building bridges of understanding.

EI and all its member unions have a responsibility in helping create the conditions that allows societies to be diverse... There are three specific areas where our International and its member organizations can make an important difference. First, promoting democracy and human rights, secondly by helping to achieve quality education for all inhabitants of this planet, and thirdly, by building a strong, independent world trade union movement.

New nationalism

I said earlier that globalization is with us to stay, but the question is, what kind of globalization? Globalization of the law of the jungle, of the rule of the strong over the weak? Or globalization that takes into account the human and social dimensions? Many conservative governments are ironically linking policies stated to enhance competitiveness in the global economy with reassertion of nationalism. That is the case in Australia, where industrial democracy has been uprooted in the name of global competitiveness, by a government that played to narrow chauvinism for electoral purposes by its rejection of asylum seekers. It is the case in one of Europe's most populous countries, Poland, which I visited recently, where the government is reasserting "traditional Polish values" while pressing for changes to make Poland more competitive. It is the case in Japan, where the Abe government has moved to insert "obligatory patriotism" as a central feature of the Education Law. Amendments of the Education Law stating the goals of education to include "respect for traditions and culture", and "love of the nation and homeland" are widely seen as preparing the way for similar amendments to the Japanese Constitution. It is the case in the United States, where government support for US-based multinational corporations goes hand in hand with building a 400 kilometer fence to keep out Mexicans.

What is the common picture here?

All these governments, Australia's included, use the combined arguments of national patriotism and global competitiveness, to push through policies that serve the short-term interests of their dominant economic groups. This approach is not only immoral, it is unsustainable over time. It is the responsibility of education unions worldwide, and of the broader trade union movement, to advocate for a globalization based on equity, social justice and common rather than competing interests, such as the need to act together on climate change. Our responsibility to promote understanding among nations and peoples is not just idealistic pie in the sky. It is vital.

Nationally and internationally there is an unrelenting assault on the very concept of democratic values and core labour standards. Competition is used to justify the law of the jungle. I put it to you that globalization should not be used to justify weakening of standards. Rather, globalization is the very reason why we need to strengthen standards and reinforce democratic values.

A strong, diverse and independent trade union movement for the 21st century

We as education unions have a special responsibility and a role to play. But we would be kidding ourselves if we thought that we could do it alone. I really believe we can achieve our vision of a better future, but to do it we must build alliances with those in our societies who are committed like us to social justice. In fact, this was a key rationale in the creation of EI.

Today EI, as a forward looking organization, is playing an important role in the international trade union movement. Last November, in Vienna, a new International Trade Union Confederation came into being with your former President, Sharan, as the first President. The new Confederation is independent of all authorities. It is not beholden to any political, religious, or cultural group. It is committed like EI to respecting diversity, and combating discrimination of any kind – whether racial, ethnic, or on the basis of language, sexual orientation, gender, age or socio-economic status. EI will continue to play a strong role as an autonomous Federation within the Council of Global Unions, which we have helped to form, and came into being in Brussels just last week.

I must underline the importance of these alliances in our advocacy at the UN, at agencies such as the World Bank and the IMF, and also when the private sector meets at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Through our cooperation with the trade union movement we have very important access to the OECD and to the G8. Last July, representing the Global Union Federations and EI, I was able to put the case for Education to President Putin as host of this year's G8 summit, as I did the previous year with Prime Minister Blair prior to the Gleneagles summit.

Trade unions have an essential role in our democratic societies. But we have to rethink the movement. Mobilizing information, mobilizing members, mobilizing partnerships, using the new tools of the information age, all of this gives new meaning to the word that underpins our trade union organizations and the progressive movement. That word is SOLIDARITY. As the economic pendulum has swung towards the primacy of the market, people know in their hearts that there is another dimension to human interaction. Without solidarity, no human community survives for long. That is as true for the global community as it is for a village.

We know that in country after country there is no peace, that democracy remains a forlorn hope, that social justice is non-existent and that equality is a distant illusion.

We know that human rights are trampled and violated. We know that all too often the law of the jungle prevails over the law of justice, that the strong are allowed to crush the weak, and that governments that should protect and defend their citizens repress them instead.

We know that ongoing violence and conflict is the reality today in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Sudan and in the Middle-East. Democracy is not to be found in North Korea nor in China. Equality does not exist for women in Saudi Arabia. Trade union rights are violated in Ethiopia and Cambodia.

And yet, it would be all too easy to say that the absence of democracy or equality or respect for human and trade rights are problems somewhere else. Those same issues are confronting us today in the very countries that have prided themselves on their democratic traditions. I mean the United States. And I mean Australia.

Colleagues, you are engaged today in a great struggle to reassert the values in education and society of respect for rights, not just for the few, not just for the privileged, but for all, at home and abroad. Rights for **all**: that is why we call them **human** rights. There is no issue that is more important as we move forward in the 21st century. It includes the right for all to quality education, with quality teachers. It includes the right to all to organize themselves in representative organizations so as to have say in the destinies and wellbeing of their families. It includes the right to social justice.

Your struggle to assert these rights, for all, is the struggle of your colleagues around the world. Just as you in AEU have so effectively supported the rights of colleagues in many other countries, so your colleagues support you. Your success will not only be success for yourselves, but also for a future generation of young Australians. And it will be a success that we will all wish to share.

I wish you a successful conference. And I wish you success beyond the conference, as you return to your schools and communities, to push back that pendulum so that once again decency, fairness and human solidarity will prevail.