

**ANDREW DETTMER – NATIONAL PRESIDENT
ADDRESS TO 2016 NATIONAL CONFERENCE**

I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners on whose land we meet, and pay my respects to their elders, past, present and future.

As delegates, you already know of the threats that we face. This Conference has before it a solution to some of those threats. I commend the resolutions which are to be placed before you.

Probably just as importantly, I would like to place on record my admiration for the main negotiators. Led by our National Secretary, Paul Bastian, this process reflects the best traditions of our union; comrades who are prepared to argue their positions without fear or favour, coming to a compromise in the interests of the union and the members - past, present and future.

This resolution perhaps has within it, the basis of a new union, a union which will be fit for purpose, and one which can lead the men and women working in our industries to a better life.

But all of us know that the resolution of internal differences is only a small part of confronting the problems which bedevil us.

We confront, every day, the impact of rampant capitalism.

You can't turn on the TV or consult social media, without yet another attack on trade unions. Sometimes it's the CFMEU, sometimes us, sometimes other unions. We are derided as out-of-touch fatcats, feather-bedding our entitlements and protecting lazy workers – and lazy industries – from the harsh winds of “economic reality”.

We are demonised for opposing Free Trade Agreements, so-called; for opposing police in workplaces; for standing up for workers to ensure that they're not injured, or worse, at work.

These critics always come with their ready answers: more competition, especially from overseas; more foreign workers; lower pay; greater “flexibility”. It's pretty hard to keep a straight face or an easy stomach when yet another employer or politician tells us that the answer to our problems is – flexibility.

They know everything, apparently, as dictated by the gods of economics. Because they know everything, they don't need the advice or views of workers or trade unions. They attack us, try to make unions less effective and tell us that we have to be more “responsible”. Many workers listen to that message, and never hear ours.

The restrictive laws we now work under make it harder and harder to be effective in the workplace. Right of Entry laws are more restrictive. They want to reintroduce the ABCC. They want to make it even more difficult for unions to operate under their “Registered Organisations” bill. These last two were apparently so important, that Malcolm Turnbull declared a double dissolution on the strength of them.

Pity that you would have been hard pressed to hear one reference to them in the “agile”, “exciting” rhetoric of a PM desperate to be reelected.

The RO bill is truly draconian. It supposedly puts the regulation of unions on a par with companies. Nothing could be further from the truth.

At last count, the companies regulator ASIC had over 1 million entities registered in Australia. ASIC has a staff of around 600, of which around 60 are employed on compliance and enforcement. Just last week, ASIC lost yet another case because they lodged proceedings out of time, which allowed the notorious company swindler Bill Lewski to get away with \$33M of shareholders money which was paid to him by his own company, Prime Trust.

Contrast this with the around 70 registered unions in Australia. There are already over 100 enforcement staff in Fair Work. The FWBC, we don't know because they won't tell us.

The Registered Organisations bill, if it becomes law, would impose upon everybody here – full time and rank and file alike – similar, and in some cases more onerous, responsibilities to those of a company director. The imposition of these duties on workers like yourselves, honourable working men and women, who simply want to do the right thing by your fellow workers, is disgraceful. Company directors do their job because they get paid to do so. Big companies like banks, resource companies, retailers, property – they pay their directors hefty 6- and 7-figure salaries.

Compare this to the vast bulk of union representatives, people like you, who get paid nothing; and even our officials, who aren't swanning around in \$4,000 suits or big cars. We do it for the love of our union, and for our fellow workers.

The impact of such laws will lead to less rather than more democracy; less rank and file participation; more professionalization; and greater cost.

Our federal government is happy about that, because they have all the answers, and don't need to be having workers telling them what they're doing wrong. Or might do better.

Joe Hockey divided Australians into “lifters” and “leaners” as an excuse to cut off all assistance to the auto industry. His reward was to become Australia's ambassador to the US. The reward for auto workers and the companies they worked for was the destruction of their industry and their jobs.

We're right to be concerned about the future. Talk of more Free Trade Agreements might go down well on the stock exchange or in the clubs of the gentry but they mean bugger all to workers. Most of us know that another flourish like the TPP, or ChAFTA, or any other useless acronym, may well mean not only our jobs but those of our kids, who lose the opportunity to gain skilled employment. We campaigned against them, especially in line with our affiliate organisation AFTINET, and were able to win some concessions, including greater restriction on the free flow of foreign labour.

The ALP has also caught this illness; they seem to think that the cure to our economic ills includes more FTAs. Then they wonder why people turn to irrational racist demagogues like Pauline Hanson.

Our union always fights against easy answers like FTAs. We voted to support the Accord under Hawke and Keating, knowing that it would reduce our ability to campaign for pay rises, but would provide considerable increases in the social wage in return. We've always opposed war, but promote and support a strong indigenous defence industry. We promote a competency-based training agenda, so that more and better skills for our members in the present and future would result.

We have a proud history. We fight for democratic control of industry, and not the empty capitalist rhetoric of "looking after shareholder value". We demand the full participation of workers and unions in industry. And we believe in the importance of political engagement, through party affiliation, and the simple idea that our union doesn't stop at the factory gate.

These days we also fight for the importance of women in our union and society, as full participants and at every level; and the full realization of the rights and entitlements of the traditional owners of this land, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, who we rightly acknowledge when we speak.

Our union has a proud history of support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues. In a couple of weeks the ACTU will be heading to Darwin and then some of us to Wave Hill, where the struggle for aboriginal land rights started. Vincent Lingiari and his Gurindji people walked off the job 50 years ago this year. It will be a great honour to represent our union, and to honour the memory of a great AMWU stalwart, Fred Thompson.

Fred provided direct assistance to the Wave Hill strikers, and drove Vincent's deputy, Captain Major, all around outback Qld and NT. The roads were unsealed, which was bad enough. But it was also illegal for aboriginal people on reserves to meet without the permission of their Superintendent. This was a real cloak-and-dagger campaign, to inform aboriginal people of the struggle to win land rights.

Freddie also helped Eddie Mabo, who was a worker at Townsville Railway Workshop and who ultimately won the case for land rights and native title in the High Court.

Our union struggles for rights internationally too. We are affiliated to three Global Union Federations: IndustriALL, the International Union of Foodworkers (IUF) and UNI-Global, represented by Sis Donnellan, Bro Hale and Sis Cassin respectively on the executives of each. I play a coordinating role.

This international presence is an important part of who we are. We believe that the role of our union doesn't finish at the factory gate. Neither do we believe that our role finishes at Australia's borders. We have worked with many international workers organisations, to assist them in organising and in some instances opposing repression. We assisted our South African comrades under apartheid; we have assisted Indonesian comrades in their struggles; we are assisting our comrades in Vietnam with helping to develop OHS and organising skills; and we assist our Filipino comrades in confronting the repressions of a government which fails to recognise all but the tamest of tame cat, yellow unions.

Many of these comrades are here with us, and I would again like to welcome you and thank you for being part of our union's conference.

Internationalism comes at a price. We don't spend a lot, and we often punch above our weight. The fact is that capital is now global; for a long time we had the slogan, "Think globally, act locally". This is now outdated; many of the employers and companies that we deal with are fully international: they expect a uniform response to their demands, and they often take a uniform approach to unions. They don't like us, and even though they try to soft soap us, we know that international capital both thinks and acts globally. So our response must be the same.

Nothing illustrated this better than when I attended the 15th Conference of the Parties for the Rotterdam Convention in May last year.

Asbestos remains a big killer of Australian workers and their families, over 10 years after it was finally banned as you heard from Emily of APHEDA. Yet internationally asbestos is still not listed as a substance which needs to be notified when it is exported.

While the importation of asbestos is banned into Australia, because of the opposition of asbestos-producing countries like Russia, there is still no requirement that asbestos even be notified when it is contained in a substance or structure, as we have recently seen in imported structures from China. We undertook joint activity at Geneva with IndustriALL. Because of that action, the Indian Government, one of the biggest supporters of the use of chrysotile asbestos, decided to change its position. The problem remains, though, and Russian activity, supported by organised crime, still ensures that the Rotterdam Convention is a dead letter when it comes to controlling asbestos importation.

I am also pleased to report that we have undertaken a number of international activities on training as well.

While VET in Australia remains underfunded, and LNP governments continue to attack TAFE, we have still maintained the integrity of our training system, especially for our trades.

In the FuturePrint project, over 300 apprentices were trained. Likewise we have been successful in demanding more apprentices be taken on, especially in State Govt-sponsored projects. Our National Coordinator for Skills and Training, Ian Curry, was recently invited to visit Germany as an expert in his field. What his visit shows is that, where there is a coordinated approach between unions, business and government on training, everybody benefits. Germany has binding minimum standards for 'in-company' training which determines what and how the apprentice will learn on-the-job; industry involvement and influence over assessment and examinations which mandate employer and union participation in competency assessment; industry leadership requiring the industrial parties to be 'demanding participants', not merely interested bystanders; a culture of apprentice training as the responsibility of the industrial parties; and consistent definitions of key trades which requires consistency and portability. There is no reason why we could not have these standards and approaches in Australia, but it won't happen without an AMWU campaign.

Our position on training is always that it needs to be high quality, it needs to be fit for purpose, it needs to lead to a whole job, and not just something in the interest of a particular employer, and it needs to be transferable and able to be built on to develop the skills required by industry for the future. We are sick and tired of shysters, often in the form of government bureaucrats, who tell us that that we need to accept less and pay more.

Funny how a lot of those same bureaucrats turn up in expensive suits working for private training providers taking advantage of the liberalisation of funding rules and the lesser accountability – and greater profit- which goes with it.

We have worked consistently for a better training system, one in which TAFE is the centre piece. However I have to report that we are failing in this task. Despite the best efforts of our national Skilled Trades Committee, coordinated by Bro Curry, the position of skilled workers goes backwards, hand in glove with the continued attack on workers rights, and cuts to workers wages.

In 2014, I represented Australian unions at the G20 summit in Brisbane. Tony Abbott (remember him? Malcolm probably hopes you don't) made a point of keeping unions out of the processes, despite our presence as the L (for Labour) 20. Unlike the B or Business 20, which was feted around the venue, the L20 was shunted off to a location 2km from the conference site. Despite this, the leaders of the G20 – Christine Lagarde, head of the International Monetary Fund, and Angel Gurría, Secretary-General of the OECD - both supported calls for greater equality in the workplace and for higher wages for workers.

Obviously no representative of the Turnbull Govt was listening. Contrary to his “Jobs and Growth” mantra (and didn't that go down well?) the Turnbull Govt can only repeat the tired old ideas of capital – work harder for less, as our comrades at CUB and Collie are finding.

While real wages grew 1.2-1.3% under the previous Labor govt, under Abbott and Turnbull, real wages have dropped 0.6%. Likewise household debt has increased from 0.9% of GDP to 5.5%. These are real indicators of economic hardship.

In the meantime, manufacturing suffers. From being the engine of growth, supported by complementary govt policies, successive governments have gone hell for leather to see resources developed. With their belief in the discredited economic doctrine of “comparative advantage”, they try to suggest to us that manufacturing isn't needed – we can “play to our strengths”, and just let the dollars roll in.

Nothing could be further from the truth; manufacturing is always needed. The transformation of Australia into a “post-manufacturing” economy is a vast joke perpetrated on the people of Australia by successive governments and fools, rent seekers who want to harvest our natural resources without having to pay for them or to pay taxes on them. Yet where do we get our manufactured goods from? This consumerist view of society and the economy suggests that, like magic, manufactured goods will simply turn up. As we deplete our natural resources and our planet, one of our greatest natural resources – our skilled workforce – is depleted, almost past the point of no return.

We continue to call upon successive governments, regardless of political orientation, to give manufacturing a new beginning.

As the research of Jim Stanford of the Australia Institute shows, the people of Australia aren't fooled. They know that manufacturing is vital for Australia's economic and social well-being, with 79% of those polled believing that manufacturing should be a national priority. Jim is with us at this Conference and is continuing the great work that he did formerly with Unifor in Canada.

Finally I would like to bring to Conference's attention some developments in Health and Safety.

I represent Australian unions on SafeWork Australia, the national regulator of OHS. There has been a significant reduction in the rights of workers to a safe and healthy workplace since our last Conference. Led by the then-LNP Govt of Queensland, a number of rights were removed or reduced. Most significantly, the right of entry of union officials to investigate an imminent risk to health and safety was made conditional on union officials giving 24 hours notice.

When you look up the word "imminent" in the dictionary, it tells you that it's an event that is "ready to take place".

So because of their fear that a competent, OHS-trained union official may come into a workplace without notice and inspect a process or machine which it is suspected is unsafe and "ready to take place", workers must wait 24 hours for the privilege of working safely.

This was done without any evidence being provided. Conservative states, which were in the majority at the time, and employers, voted en bloc for this restriction.

There are many other examples of OHS being compromised by sheer, blind ideology. I am, as ever, indebted to Sis Deb Vallance for her assistance and leadership in this area. Her preeminence as the leading OHS practitioner in Australia, is known and acknowledged by all –including many reluctant employer and govt reps who know that they are dealing with one of the best there is.

Comrades, I don't want to take up any more of your time than I already have. I believe that the challenges which face this union and this country can be met. We are a great union. But the world does not owe us a living.

We have a choice: to go on as before, and pretend all is well (and act surprised when the walls fall in); to prepare to abandon ship, and plan for our eventual demise; or to change and become the modern, dynamic collective organisation that will take up the fight with capital.

I believe that we have the basis of a new union within our grasp. We must work hard to ensure that we provide the answers, or some of them, to the question of what a modern, fit for purpose 21st century Australian union looks like.

And I look forward to working out those answers with you.

Thank you.