

Dave Oliver, AMWU Speech, July 27.

I'd like to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, I pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Thank you for inviting me here today – it's great to be with you again. First I wish to congratulate you on your fantastic "SUBS=JOBS, BUILD THEM ALL HERE" campaign. I know that without your hard work and innovative crowd funding ideas the subs would never have been built here in Australia. This was a massive win for working people and you should be proud of your efforts.

I also want to recognise the achievements of our "Build a Better Future Campaign", which has to date been one the most successful union campaigns in a generation. Before I go into the "Build a Better Future Campaign ", let me briefly go over what was at stake in this election.

When Tony Abbott was elected in 2013, he wasted no time in executing his extreme right-wing agenda. We saw over \$80 billion in cuts to our schools and hospitals. We saw them rip the guts out of the social safety net. We saw millions of taxpayers' dollars wasted on a witch-hunt designed to attack unions.

Even as the IMF admitted the failure of neoliberal policies, and the extreme inequality that these policies have caused, we had a government doggedly pursuing their trickle-down fantasy.

In the wake of the savage 2014 budget, we heard Joe Hockey claim that fair wages, proper working conditions, and social support for people who need it represent an 'age of entitlement'. We heard racist rhetoric and fear-mongering directed at Muslim members of our communities,

people seeking asylum, and Indigenous people. We saw people who rely on social support demonised.

This was language designed to divide us – to make us turn against each other, and against those doing it tough, while the top one per cent grows bloated with obscene wealth.

It's a recipe for social and economic upheaval, and for the type of fear and anger that we saw with the Brexit vote in the UK, and with the rise of Donald Trump in the US.

When Malcolm Turnbull took over, I, like many of us, was initially hopeful. He reached out to me and other union leaders with what seemed to be genuine interest in meaningful dialogue. He proclaimed the end of three-word slogans, and of divisive language. But no substance ever followed these overtures.

Instead, we got a government that not only failed to roll back the brutal Abbott-Hockey cuts, but one which decided to hand corporations \$50 billion in new tax cuts on top of this. We got a government so hell-bent on eroding the rights of construction workers that they were prepared to use the ABCC as their excuse for calling a double dissolution. We got a Prime Minister and Treasurer who continued the “age of entitlement” style rhetoric, lecturing Australians about how we all have to “live within our means”. All of us, that is, except for the multi-millionaires and billionaires - whose wealth has hit the roof.

There's only one way to fight back in the face of a policy agenda as damaging as the Turnbull Government's. There's only one way to get a different narrative out there, one based on fairness, human decency, and positive hope for the future.

There's only one way and - you know what I'm going to say – the Australian union movement organising, collaborating and campaigning and that's what we did.

For the last 12 months, local union members all over Australia built campaigns in their communities. Week in, week out they ran street stalls, meetings at town halls, 80 national door knocks, about 180,000 phone calls, and handing out leaflets at train stations. They stood up for the real things that we all value in our lives. The right to be paid penalty rates when we give up our weekends and public holidays to work. To access properly funded schools and universal healthcare. To have secure jobs, proper wages and free time to spend with the people we love.

Perhaps most remarkable was that, for the first time, we also campaigned for tax as a *good* thing – not a burden, but something that pays for the social goods we all enjoy. And people were on board with that.

In standing up for these values, union members were fundamentally demanding one simple thing: their fair share of the profits that they have created.

And by making these demands, we, as a union movement, built a counter-narrative that actually struck right at the core of neoliberalism. We cooperated as a movement to take this narrative to scale. We did that in a way that no other progressive force in Australia could do.

And it worked.

There were 16,000 people involved.

We had 46,000 conversations with union members who were swinging voters in the target seats and convinced over 33,000 of them to put the Liberals last.

We held over 80 door knocks around the nation.

We had a secret union army on the ground and used sophisticated data analysis to make strategic decisions.

Within a 48 hour period, right before the election, we handed out 1 *million* replica Medicare cards.

Think about that. That is contact with 1 million voters in 48 hours. That's unity. That's scale. That's impact. There is no other progressive movement in Australia that has that kind of capacity for cooperation and rapid action.

The impact of the massive depth and scale of engagement that we achieved as a movement proved itself in the election results.

In the 22 seats where we had a community-based local campaign, the average swing away from the Government was 5.5%. That's **2.0%** higher than the national swing. These are marginal seats where elections are won or lost on a few hundred votes. The 2.0% difference that we made means that we convinced an average of two *thousand* more people not to vote Liberal in each of those marginals.

Two thousand votes. In 22 seats.(Herbert)

That's organising.

I'd also like to especially acknowledge the incredible contributions that the AMWU made to this campaign.

The AMWU was the very first union to participate in our Voter ID program back in 2015. You gave us the contact details of over 20,000 of your members in our target seats.

We completed surveys with 7,185 of them, enabling us to identify over 3,000 of them that were undecided voters.

Through phone banks across the country, you helped to convince 86% of them to put the Liberals last. That's a fantastic rate – well above the national average. It was a very significant contribution to what we achieved together on 2 July.

Well done!

The Build a Better Future campaign has been even more effective than the Rights at Work campaign (union premium 2% vs 1.6%). This was possible because of the decisions we took in 2012 to make sure we had the adequate resources to be a truly effective campaigning organisation.

We recognised that we would never take charge of the political narrative, with an agenda that centres on working people, if we develop our campaigns in small siloes or run them in short-term spurts. We knew that we needed to get out there and do the continuous, long term work of actually shifting the narrative. That we need to organise and campaign on a mass scale. That this isn't just about winning single

issue campaigns, or even just mobilising around elections – it is about making a better future possible.

Because we had done the year-long work of building our narrative and the campaign infrastructure, we not only influenced the election through campaigning, but we also changed ALP policy. From policy on 457 visas, to regulating labour hire companies, apprentice ratios, to fully funding Gonski, extra funding for Medicare, a progressive position on tax and they even announced a royal commission into the banks. We pushed for these policies, we presented them to the Australian people, and it worked.

We even saw people like Bill Shorten, Bowen, Penny Wong and Tanya Plibersek go out there and criticise terms like ‘trickle-down’ and neoliberal during this election. For the first time, our political leaders are actually naming the ideology that is impacting us.

Meanwhile, the Liberals’ message of fear failed. The election result proves that people want a government that can tackle inequality, insecurity, discrimination and neglect. They believe that no community should be left behind.

So, where to from here?

I’m not going to pretend I have the answers to every economic and social policy question.

But it’s clear that our movement has got to keep setting the agenda.

Economic uncertainty has reached critical levels globally. On the political front global security is threatened by terrorism, a protracted

war in Syria, a massive refugee crisis, rising tensions between key nations in Asia, and uncertainty about the intentions of Russia in Eastern Europe, and the UK and the US face great uncertainty about their future political leadership and the rise of Hanson here in Australia.

Underpinning this precarious political and economic environment has been thirty years of widening income inequality. We were promised that free trade, financial market deregulation and the free movement of capital across borders would provide greater prosperity for all. Instead we live in a world with income inequalities that are greater than at any time in the last century. Small elites have amassed vast fortunes and massive political power. While for the vast majority of people, living standards have declined, job security has disappeared and their faith in democracy is threatened.

In Australia, we have an increasing number of people who aren't being paid enough to pay for basic family necessities. Jobs are becoming more insecure and unemployment and underemployment numbers are up.

Australia has also recently recorded the lowest wage growth for 18 years. Workers have been caught in a pincer movement over the last 30 years between the forces of globalisation and reforms designed to provide greater labour market flexibility. This combination of reforms is toxic. Australian workers have simultaneously faced a massive increase in competition through free trade agreements and 457 visas, from low paid workers from countries like China and elsewhere and, on the home front, the weakening of labour market institutions that once protected them - with the decentralisation of wage determination and reduced reliance on Awards, the rapid expansion of non-standard forms

of work and reduced employment protection. This simultaneous attack from the outside and the inside is the main long term explanation for the slow-down in wage growth and the dramatic increase in income inequality.

Australian workers have not been getting their fair share of the pie for decades. Meanwhile, executive salaries, bonuses for bank bosses and corporate perks have sky-rocketed.

With wages stagnant, and an unfair tax system that encourages property speculation rather than investment in the real economy, we have an unsustainable and unfair economic growth model. This is reflected in widening income inequality, which in Australia is at a 75 year high.

This rising income inequality will have profound social and political implications. If income inequality continues to grow, and the link between wages and productivity is not restored, we will see the increasing Americanisation of Australian society. American workers have not had an increase in their national minimum wage for seven years. The United States has the weakest labour laws and the most rapid increase in income inequality in the OECD.

Over the last 30 years American employers have managed to almost wipe out trade unions, eliminate collective bargaining and avoid any responsibility for paying overtime, penalty rates and other benefits. Is this the future that Australia wants?

We also need to continue the fight against privatisation of our essential services and the many problems it creates. If you don't want to take this from me take it from Rid Simms of the ACCC;

"I'm now almost at the point of opposing privatisation because it's been done to boost proceeds, it's been done to boost asset sales and I think it's severely damaging our economy."

Of course, the challenge is not in describing the problems and threats, but in finding the solutions that will secure widespread support and help us get to a better and fairer future.

It's an especially critical time for us to lead a debate about these solutions now. Just after an election is the right time to have national debate on social and economic policy. We will be working on agenda to bring people together and create this debate going forward.

We need to be thinking about the future of work. Working life as we know it will be transformed in the next few decades. New advances in digital technologies such as 'sharing' economy platforms like uber, robotics, machine learning, and big data collection will be key drivers of this.

During previous technological and industrial revolutions, such as the computerisation of factories in the 1980s, the information superhighway of the 1990s, and the 'dot.com' boom of the 2000s, technological developments were also used as a cover for eroding industrial entitlements and workers share of profits.

Whether workers benefit from future technological developments or instead find their conditions eroded; and whether workers' get a fair

share of the new wealth created, depends to a large degree on our policy choices.

The policy responses that could actually make it possible for working people to enjoy the benefits that technology and automation could bring – responses such as portable leave entitlements, or other flexicurity measures such as lifelong skills training, or possibly the Universal Basic Income or some version of it – are barely entering the debate.

Looking through this lens we have to find innovative ways of building our movement, we need to look beyond traditional membership models and think about how, for example, portable membership may be an appealing option that leads to recruitment and retention. As a movement we have to look at our structures if we were building the movement from scratch, I don't think it would look like much what we currently have. Difficult decisions will need to be taken regarding. Conglomeration, mergers and restructures (and I know this conference is doing just that).

How do we get to where we want to go?

We should be proud of what we have achieved and built as part of the 'Build a Better Future' campaign and I will guarantee we will not make the same mistakes of the Rights of Work campaign and dismantle the infrastructure - quite the contrary we are going to build on the foundations

We know that a long-haul approach is needed to meet the intensity of the challenges we now face.

This time we are not going anywhere.

And when it comes to the huge and critical task of imagining new solutions for our future, we now have an army of 16,000 committed volunteers on board and one of the biggest union wide databases that we must enrich and maintain.

This, I believe, is the most fundamental mission that we have as a union movement: to reject the greed and inequality that shapes today's dominant business model, to push for an alternative vision built on fairness and decency, to keep pushing until what seems impossible today becomes inevitable tomorrow.

By continuing our 'Build a Better Future Campaign', we are on our way.

Thank you.