

# Equality.



November 2015

## The Future of Australia's Trade Unions

A strong trade union movement is crucial to combating growing wealth inequality in the Australian economy.

[When asked in 2014 what Australia 'had done right' to defend the economy against the chronic wealth inequality experienced in the US](#), Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz answered: 'unions'. He explained that Australia has 'been able to maintain stronger trade unions than the United States. The absence of any protection for workers, any bargaining power, has had adverse effects in the United States. You [Australia] have a minimum wage of around \$15 an hour. We [the US] have a minimum wage of \$8 an hour. That pulls down our entire wage structure'.

Regardless of their comparative strength to unions in the US, Australian unions cannot afford to be complacent about their long term survival.

Recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, [as analysed in The Guardian by Greg Jericho](#), paint a worrying picture for the Australian trade union movement. Jericho reports that 'trade union membership in the private sector is now almost one in 10... And in a sign of further strife for the union movement, just one in 20 young workers are in a trade union'. The public sector (39.5%) and education (34.38%) industries have the highest percentage of trade union membership, but as the number of workers in traditionally strong union industries such as manufacturing decline, so too does union membership, particularly amongst male workers. In fact, Jericho points out, whereas men used to be more likely to be union members, women now make up a higher percentage of union members, with 15.9% of female workers members of a union as compared to 14.4% of men. The total percentage of trade union members in the Australian workforce is now 15.1%, and only 13.8% if you include workers in unincorporated

enterprises. This compares to 40.5% in 1990.

[Commenting on these figures, former ACTU official, Tim Lyons](#), says 'Australian unions have only a few years to change or die'. [Lyons is reported as blaming](#) the 'historic collapse in union membership' on 'an outdated approach that does not work across large parts of the workforce', and admits the blame is shared by him as a 'former senior ACTU officer'. He says that too often, unions are seen as only being concerned with their position in the political sphere and that 'Political campaigning can't ever be an excuse for not organising'. He goes on to argue that 'The need for new models of membership and worker participation is long overdue'. Offering a potential way forward, Lyons suggests; 'Strong, growing unions are ones that help give workers some power over their work and therefore their lives. There are no shortage of workplace issues to organise around, with penalty rates being only the most obvious'. Lyons sees unions' futures in re-evaluating their value to workers and helping workers organise to help themselves, with less emphasis on political campaigning.

Amongst their assessments of the declining membership of Australian unions, Jericho and Lyons comment on some more positive news for unions by citing polling released recently in Essential Media's [Essential Report](#), October 27 2015. The poll asked 'How important are unions for Australian working people today?' and found 'The majority of respondents regarded unions to be important for Australian working people today (62%), whilst 28% believe that they were not important'.

Ged Kearney, President of the ACTU, [responded to the ABS's declining union membership figures](#) by pointing out that 'while union membership density is hovering around 15% of workers, more than 60% of Australian workers are employed under conditions that were collectively bargained for' and 'Even for workers not covered by collective agreements, they still directly benefit from their broad acceptance. The ubiquitousness of such agreements has led to them becoming the de facto base rate across much of the workforce, rather than the relevant award'.

The challenge for Australian unions is to translate the belief amongst workers of the importance of the role of unions, and the reality of unions' benefit to wage growth, into a belief that union membership is a valuable investment for workers' individual job conditions. A strong, united workers' trade union movement is the best line of defence, as pointed out by Stiglitz, to defend against growing economic wealth inequality.

## **Young Fabians – make your voice matter**

Young Fabian members are invited to submit articles for the December 2015 Equality newsletter. The topic is "GST: what's the best deal for Australians?"

The best two articles will be selected for publication by our editorial team. The successful authors will each receive a \$100 book voucher.

Article length: 600 words in Word format, English (UK), single spacing. Please

keep article references to a minimum.

Required: your full name, occupation, email address, mobile phone number.

Submissions deadline: 12 noon AEST, 2 December 2015 to [editor@fabian.org.au](mailto:editor@fabian.org.au). Editor's decision is final.

## What are Fabians saying?

**Andrew Hunter** published an article in the *Adelaide Review* titled 'Will the Left insist on getting it right?': 'Ernest Hemingway wrote 47 alternate endings to Farewell to Arms, which was ultimately published in 1929. When asked the reasons for writing so many different endings, he once replied: "Getting the words right." If only we had a similarly absolute determination to perfect our society'. [Read the full article](#).

**Dr Andrew Leigh MP** gave a speech in Parliament on October 22 about the sharing economy, where he said: 'The sharing economy offers great potential for Australian innovators. It also offers the chance to tackle big challenges such as congestion and housing affordability'. [Read the full speech](#).

## Fabian Interview

Interview with **Joel Deane**, author of *Catch and Kill: The Politics of Power*. [Listen to Podcast](#).

## Events

### 2015 C.E. Martin Memorial Dinner with Tanya Plibersek MP

Thursday, November 26, 2015 at 6:00pm  
The Apprentice in Ultimo, Sydney

The NSW Fabians are proud to host its 3rd annual C.E. Martin Memorial Dinner on Thursday 26th November.

The dinner is named in honour of the first President of the NSW Fabian Society, Clarence Edward Martin, the longest serving Attorney-General in New South Wales history.

Our keynote guest speaker will be the Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, Deputy Leader of the Opposition.

It will be a great opportunity to share a night among friends and fellow members

and support the work the NSW Fabians have done over the past year.

[Buy Tickets](#)

## **2015 South Australian Fabians AGM, Festive Drinks and Presentation of 2016 Program**

[Monday, November 30](#), 2015 at 5:30pm – 7pm  
225 Carrington Street, Adelaide

Please bring a small Christmas gift for a child to be donated to [Welcome to Australia](#).

RSVP via Text Message with your name and number of guests: 0400 253 752

## **Victorian Fabians Annual Dinner**

Tuesday, December 1, 2015 at 6:30pm  
William Angliss, 550 Little Lonsdale Street, Melbourne

The Australian Fabians, in association with the Labor Environment Action Network (LEAN) Victoria, invite you to our Annual Dinner on Tuesday December 1, 2015.

Speakers for the event include:

Fiona McCormack, CEO of Domestic Violence Victoria  
Prof. Ross Garnaut, Chair of the Garnaut Climate Change Review

For more information and to purchase tickets, [click here](#).

## **Death or Liberty: Rebels and radicals transported to Australia**

Thursday, December 03, 2015 at 6:30pm – 9:30pm  
[Sydney Trades Hall](#), 4 Goulburn Street, Sydney

Sydney premiere Death or Liberty – the new feature length docu-drama that brings to life the forgotten histories of the rebels and radicals transported to Australia as political prisoners in the convict era. Directed by Steve Thomas, and based on historian Dr Tony Moore's book of the same name. Death or Liberty is an international co-production by Tasmania's Roar Film and Ireland's Tile Films, featuring a folk punk soundtrack performed by Billy Bragg, Mick Thomas and Lisa O'Neil.

A special event marking the anniversary of the Eureka Stockade, hosted by

Sydney Labour History, the NSW Fabians and UnionsNSW, Death or Liberty will be launched by Peter Fitzsimons, Chair of the Australian Republican Movement, followed by a panel discussion with Steve Thomas, Tony Moore and Mick Thomas in conversation with historian Assoc. Prof Kirsten McKenzie.

[Tickets for this special event are \\$10 each.](#)

## Membership matters

Renewals for 2016 membership are now open. Visit [fabians.org.au/renew](http://fabians.org.au/renew) for more information or contact [membership@fabian.org.au](mailto:membership@fabian.org.au)

The 2014 Annual Reports are available at [fabians.org.au/annual\\_reports](http://fabians.org.au/annual_reports)

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