

I wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we meet on and pay respects to their elders past and present.

I'm delighted to be with you here at the Australian Intercultural Society. Thank you for having me.

The ACTU is the peak body representing 50 different unions and some 2 million members. Our work benefits 60% of the workforce directly through minimum wage and EBA negotiations and through legislative and policy advocacy- we have an impact on the entire workforce.

It's our mission to work toward a fair, equal and inclusive society where all workers have access to decent jobs with fair wages and working conditions... no matter who they are or where they come from.

The subject today, "the role of Australian unions in building a better future for marginalised Australians" is one that is close to my heart and to the heart of the union movement.

In fact the union movement was born out of the struggle to ensure one group isn't exploited for the benefit of another - more powerful - group.

The struggle against oppression and the inception of the union movement in Australia are in inextricably linked... all the way back to the early settlers.

Take the case of convict shepherd James Straighter.

It was 1822. A time where convicts felt abused and exploited. They often worked tough manual jobs while being treated appallingly. And in those fledgling days of the Australian union movement, in the spirit of uniting – of strength in numbers, James Straighter found himself punished for organising against his so-called master.

For the crime of - quote - "inciting his Masters' servants to combine for the purposes of obliging him to raise the wages and increase their rations" James Straighter received 500 lashes, one month solitary confinement and five years penal servitude.

I'm happy to say we've come a long way but the struggle is far from over.

Migration and temp visas

In Australia we have a great deal to be thankful for when it comes to the contribution of our migrant communities. There is a contribution that has grown from sacrifice- where they faced, at minimum, indifference and, at worst, outright racism- many migrants still do.

If I think of the big waves of migration in my lifetime:

- The mass migration of the 60s with Ten Pound Poms.
- The Europeans who came with the policies of huge nation building projects- infrastructure and agricultural developments- they brought skills, trades, strength, character and numbers. They brought a rich cultural diversity.
- Then I think of the Vietnamese refugees of the 70s, I still remember watching them arrive on television and I remember having never seen their pointy hats before- which are now so much a part of Vietnamese Australian identity. They brought so much to Australia - textile skills; they started small businesses and brought with them such a passion for education and betterment.
- And then there were those that came from other countries experiencing conflicts- Chile, Lebanon, Eastern Europe.

They too faced racism, discrimination and marginalization.

But...

The hallmark of that era was that those wonderful people came on the understanding they had permanent citizenship. There was security and dignity in knowing that their children would enjoy the benefits of their hard work and sacrifice. Confident that Australia was their home, they invested in their new country with pride.

And haven't we thrived?

But now our migration system has changed.

This may surprise some but today in Australia a staggering 10 per cent of the workforce is made up of temporary overseas workers.

It's the "Try before you buy" model- a stepping stone to permanency... for some. The fast road to debt and despair for some others.

For many it is a sickle over their heads and a gate to exploitation and mistreatment.

We are in serious danger of creating a sub class of workers, a sub class of citizens.

Just a few examples:

- An NUW and 4Corners expose' on working holiday (417) visa workers found they were being denied pay and basic conditions, underpaid and subjected to abuse, sexual assault and racism.
- Visa workers having half their salary deducted by their sponsoring employer to pay for migration agent fees on the promise of getting permanent residency.
- Shark agents arranging exorbitant loans for visa holders to pay off their agent fees with interest rates of up to 48%. Can you believe it! 48%! Is that even legal?
- In one case, a large number of nurses from China were brought to Australia on the promise of getting a 457 visa after they received some English language training, but the jobs never materialised and they were forced to return home with large debts for the training and the agent's fees.
- A visa holder who was nominated as a customer service manager but was found to be actually working as a cleaner for \$28,000 a year - \$25,000 below the TSMIT of \$53,900 a year.
- Not even the priesthood is immune from the problems of the visa program. In two cases priests from overseas countries were engaged on 457 visas with a nominated salary of \$72,000 but once in Australia they took a pay cut of \$16,000, with their actual salary found to be \$56,000.

These are common stories. Not rare. It's business. People are making money off the backs of vulnerable international workers and it's *only* possible because of current policies around temporary visas and migration. Policies the current Government supports.

We need to ensure these workers know their rights and responsibilities. We need access to them before they leave their country of origin.

Ironically... the push by unions to expose the exploitation and abuse of temporary overseas workers has seen us accused of xenophobia or playing the race card. It's a slur we will continue to hear from our opponents I'm sure.

But we will never allow the debate to be hijacked in that direction.

For our part, the union movement is proud of the role we have played in advocating on behalf of all workers affected by the temporary visa program.

Indigenous.

Many employers are good and fair but just as many are not and that's why we need a Government who stands up for workers. Unfortunately the Abbott Government has shown time and time again that they are no friend of the worker and are quite happy to sell out on entire communities if it doesn't suit their agenda.

The Australian trade union movement has a proud history of standing alongside with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through some of the most significant civil rights campaigns in this country.

So like many others in the community we have been appalled at the treatment of our first people.

- Language used such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being engaged with "real jobs".
- The self-declared Prime Minister for Aboriginal Affairs slashed ½ billion dollars from Indigenous Affairs - \$165 million of which was cut from Aboriginal Community Controlled Health.
- Tony Abbott's declaration that taxpayers should not be expected to fund the 'lifestyle choices' of Aboriginal people living in remote communities and that Australia owes its existence to 'foreign investment by the British government' shows us his true colours on the rights and position of First Nation peoples in Australia.

The unemployment rate in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is higher than the national unemployment rate.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote communities the government has introduced what can only be described as a race-based Work for the Dole scheme.

Minister Nigel Scullion said that people on Newstart would have to work for 25 hours per week, 52 weeks per year. This is clearly a policy of forced labour for well under the minimum wage – about \$10 an hour.

If you live in an area with income quarantining, what you receive in the hand *will be about \$5 an hour*.

And if you live in the Northern Territory it will be even worse.

Under the Abbott Government's *White Paper on Developing Northern Australia*, businesses will be rewarded with free labour indefinitely while Aboriginal workers work for a pittance - does that sound chillingly familiar?

Work initiatives must be based on *real* consultation, self-determination and an understanding of the unique position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The union movement will not stand idly by and watch a racist return to the rations mentality of the past and we'll fight any moves to exploit workers under less than minimum wages and conditions.

Decent work

That's what unions do. We want a better life for workers and by extension families and communities. All people. All nationalities. A fair and equitable way of life.

Undoubtedly, the key to that better life is *decent work*.

Barriers to work for migrants are, I'm sure, well known to many of you in this room. I want to focus now on barriers to decent work.

Decent work is much more than an adequate pay cheque every fortnight- Decent work is work that is inclusive and provides workers with a safe, fair and friendly workplace that utilizes their skills, has fulfilling social interactions, freedom, opportunity and economic security.

Decent work is work that is not just about the economy or increasing profits.

Participating in the workforce can enhance people's lives and enable them to be included in society.

Increased workforce participation can also bring many benefits to the wider economy, by opening up a wider range of skills, backgrounds and experiences to the labour market.

Decent work means dignity!

The emergence over the last couple of decades of contract work that leaves people in precarious employment is another serious impediment to decent jobs. 40% of our workforce is now in insecure work, whether it is casual, short term contract or more worrying "sham" contracting where workers are forced to become independent contractors when they should in fact be employees.

The independent inquiry into insecure work chaired by the former deputy prime minister, Brian Howe, found that migrant workers were amongst those over represented in this category.

For example: Mrs Fan, a Vietnamese piece worker, earned \$7 per garment that retailed for \$700. If she made mistake she was fined the retail price. She was given huge orders that she worked all night to fill. When asked how she kept awake, she said "fear, fear kept her awake". Fear she would not make the quota.

So what do we do about it?

Firstly we need to tackle the issue of insecure work. We need to make workers lives more secure, with predictable incomes, a say in when and where they work, time to care for dependents, safe workplaces and ensure they have dignity and are protected from exploitation.

We need to preserve the hard fought for protections of the FWA and other legislation – so-called "regulatory burden" or "red tape".

I call it "blue ribbon" because it is the protection that we wrap around workers to make sure they are not subjected to the full cruelties of the free market and ideas like "special economic zones" that are espoused by those only interested in excessive profits.

And unions need to be more strategic about organising workplaces with high numbers of migrant workers.

The ACTU has advocated for the expansion of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency to take in a wider range of vulnerable groups facing barriers to employment. There needs to be better reporting and monitoring of diversity practices in corporations.

As a start it would be good to see more employers benchmark their workforce diversity and to put in place their own plans to improve the employment of people from migrant backgrounds.

We can't do it alone or in isolation.

We need to work together.

Domestic Violence leave.

Recently I had the pleasure of standing side by side with Rosie Batty in calling for Domestic Violence leave in workplaces. Many of you know Rosie's story, the loss of her son and the extraordinary strength she has demonstrated in coming forward. Unfortunately her story is not unique.

One woman dies every week from domestic violence.

Two thirds of the over 400,000 (mostly women) who experience domestic violence each year, are in paid employment. We know that keeping that job is critical in leaving a violent relationship.

They shouldn't be forced to choose between their jobs and wellbeing.

Case study: Rose* had an AVO against her abusive ex-partner to keep her and her children safe. She had used all her personal leave.

When she asked her employer for a morning off work to renew the AVO which was due to expire she was refused and told she had to wait until her day off. Rose had to choose between her and her children's safety or her job.

Domestic violence costs the Australian economy \$16.8 billion each year.

Domestic violence can cost the women(or man) their job, lead to long term health issues, poverty and homelessness.

Many employers have already recognised the importance of paid domestic violence leave.

Over the past 5 years, unions have negotiated paid domestic violence leave in workplace agreements for over 1.6 million employees. Our claim is to provide family and domestic violence leave and protections for all Australian workers.

Let me be clear on this next point!

Domestic violence is not - and should not - be a private matter that is dealt with behind closed doors.

It is a systemic issue involving a wide range of social, economic and cultural factors that must be addressed in the public sphere – including workplaces.

Having access to domestic violence leave means victims have time to attend court appearances and related appointments, seek legal advice and make relocation arrangements.

Besides ten days of DV leave, our claim includes the right to request a change in working arrangements, such as start and finish times and other safety measures such as changing work email and phone numbers.

Evidence shows having an income gives women choice, stops them becoming trapped and isolated in violent and abusive relationships, and enables them to care for their children and provide them with a safe home environment.

Improving the lives of those who experience domestic violence not only helps them, it improves the type of society we live in. It makes us a place where compassion is shown. Where workers have a safety net so that when things go wrong there're are policies in place to help us bounce back.

These are the issues that get me out of bed every day, and make me proud to be a union leader.

This is the society I wish to live in, what about you?

International

Fiji

We're lucky in Australia. Unions have maintained strength despite the onslaught from conservative forces who strive for a profits-at-all-costs agenda. Other nations have not been so fortunate.

The idyllic island paradise of Fiji, for example, is presented as a relaxing oasis to tourist but this belies the fear and oppression the Pacific nation's workers wake up to each morning.

The reality for workers in Fiji is they have few rights; they go to work each day in fear and any attempts to stand up for their rights can have grave physical repercussions.

On numerous occasions permit applications by trade unions have been refused and revoked. This has severely limited the capacity of trade unions to undertake their everyday work representing workers.

In 2011 I was part of a delegation of Australian and New Zealand trade unionists who attempted to enter Fiji. We didn't hide who we were and for this we got as far as the airport where we were promptly refused entry and marched onto the next flight to Sydney.

In all honesty I didn't expect much more. But it was worth making the point. Fiji has no tolerance for unions or appetite to improve the lives of local workers.

Bangladesh

Australians can no longer pretend the atrocities in other nations are separate to our daily lives. From honeymoons in Fiji to garment factories in Bangladesh...

There are few words to describe the horror of the April 2013 Rana Plaza building collapse that left well-over 1000 dead and 2500 injured.

In the days following this disaster names of brands we use in Australia surfaced as the employers. They had off-shored their manufacturing to developing nations, made little or no effort to ensure safety and paid workers poorly wages to boot.

These are the clothes we buy. There are the brands we know. They have responsibly to be honourable where ever they go... but unfortunately that's not the case.

We must support our international comrades as they fight to improve their rights. In Indian the movement is gaining momentum and there are now regular protest against oppression in what is the epitome of a David and Goliath battle.

Recently the streets of Dhaka were filled with protested calling for supermarket giant Aldi to pay up over claims they owe wages to 1000 workers.

There are a-rumblings my friends! If workers around the world unite nothing can hold us back.

Conclusion

The struggle between the powerful who stand to profit and those who wish to be paid a fair wage and be treated with dignity will continue. Convicts James Straighter was whipped and punished, the Howard Government rolled out Workchoices, the Abbott Government has their Royal Commission but it won't stop workers from standing up for fairness and equality. Thank you.