

Dave Oliver speech to the ACTU 2016 Leadership Forum

4 February 2016

First allow me to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Thank you all for coming here for making the time to be here over the next two days. The fact that so many union leaders from around the country have come along, in fact we are over subscribed, shows that building our movement remains a priority and that this is a meeting, not to discuss union decline, but to plan for union growth.

I'm not going to stand here and recite all the good work our movement has done in this country. We all know the hard work that goes into improving the living standards of people every single day. We know it's our movement that gives workers power to Front bosses who want to cut wages, slash conditions or even worse cut corners on safety. Its our movement that makes it possible to hold political representatives accountable for their decisions. And it's the collective that amplifies the voices of working people in public debates.

It's why our opponents are on the march and want to bring us down.

I have a message for them: We're a movement of one point six million people. We've been here for one hundred and sixty years. And we ain't going nowhere.

The role of our movement is clear. When unions are strong, when people join unions, when we are shaping the policies of the nation income

inequality is lessened, when income inequality is lessened economic growth happens and living standards improve. This isn't bolshevik propaganda or just my personal economic beliefs. These are facts established by that bastion of left wing ideas... the International Monetary Fund. IMF research has shown the direct link between growing inequality and declining union density. We are seeing it play out around the world, particularly in the U.S.

Here in Australia we have a conservative Prime Minister writing the tale of two commissions.

First a Royal Commission that wasted tens of millions of dollars of tax payer's money designed to weaken political opponents while doing nothing to address the broader issues in politics, business and society of governance and wrong doing.

Corruption is a human condition not a union condition.

This is why we have called for an independent national body to investigate wrong doing wherever it may be.

But let me say this: There is no place for crooks in our movement.

While we condemn corruption wherever it may be we also recognise we have a duty not to leave it just to others. Improving our governance is something we take seriously and recognise is a continuous process of improvement. Our members deserve the best governance standards which is why we are working with affiliates to implement improvements in governance, to train officials and delegates and support them making changes that improve their practices.

Then there's the other commission, A productivity commission, was set up to once again go after rights at work. Yet another broad attack on the take home pay, working conditions and workplace safety standards.

And now we have a government that has the gall to say they will “fight for the interests of workers”.

Is there anyone here who believes cutting penalty rates, jacking up the GST, gutting Medicare, privatising TAFE, pricing education out of the reach of working people, cutting the time parents can afford to spend with their new born children, making it easier to sack workers, making it harder for them to get representation and support, forcing them onto take it or leave it contracts, driving down the minimum wage and forcing more and more people into insecure work is actually “in the interests of working people”?

This year is an election year and we will fight for our agenda at this election. We will prosecute an agenda that protects weekend and penalty rates, that ensures all people have access to the healthcare they need not just what they can afford, , that retirement means a decent life with a fair pension and superannuation nest egg, that our public services are run by and for the public, that a fair go in Australia means everyone getting the support they need to have a better life and contributing their fair share of tax.

Even if they are a multinational corporation.

And let me make special mention of the work the education unions have done to ensure that our education system is of the highest quality by gaining commitments from the ALP to implement Gonski in full should they win the next election.

Make no mistake whether the government calls an election this weekend or in spring: We are ready to go. We have our people on the ground talking with workers every day, engaging in workplaces, in communities and in homes from Cairns to Colac and from Darwin to Devonport.

Regardless of who is in government our movement will continue to

campaign on our issues. The Build a Better Future agenda is one that will extend beyond this election.

We must never simply be a transactional movement. That is why we have built and will maintain our national campaigning capacity no matter who is in government.

And when it comes to growth we cannot simply rely on others to do it for us. It is our responsibility.

Some of the questions we need to ask are; Why don't people won't join unions? Why DO people join unions?

We know that despite the efforts of Abbott & Turnbull, and their corporate executive mates, there is widespread recognition of the important role unions play. Around 60% of Australian's think we play an important role in Australian life yet only 17% join.

Things can't be business as usual. We need to look at the membership models that are out there and how we can use them. We need to look at our recruitment techniques. Is door to door recruitment fit for purpose in every scenario? Can we develop a more wholesale approach?

If this forum was to establish a union movement in this country for the very first time would it look anything like it actually does? Or would it be very different?

I suggest to you that our movement must not only keep pace with change but must seek to shape change, as we have in the past.

The rise of the digital workplace, increasing insecurity and the rampant nature of globalisation has created challenges for unions, not just here but around the world.

The boundaries of work are breaking down. People want more flexibility and personal control over their time and their lives. The concept of anytime-anyplace work has appeal to many people who see technology as a potential liberator from their desk, cubicle or workstation. The challenge for us is how do we ensure that anytime-anyplace flexibility does not become always & everywhere demands. The increasing number of platforms that force workers into a reverse ebay style auction of bidding on parcels of work presents new challenges, for building solidarity and organising workers.

But workers don't always need "bricks and mortar" to get organised. We have seen how by creating online communities workers in disparate locations have organised themselves, have joined campaigns for change and to protect their living standards. Of course we are in this space and continually getting better at it. We must build on what we have done so far and take it to the next level by converting activism into Membership.

To make that a reality we need to challenge and change our perception of what membership means. Is the current "standard membership" model enough? I'm a member of the St Kilda Football club and there is seven different types of membership I could choose from to suit my level of engagement, involvement, interest and needs. Is this something we need to look at for our organisations?

We need to be proposing policies and initiatives that are relevant to today's workers.

We know 40% of workers are in insecure employment.

With so many workers in insecure work and the abuses against workers in precarious employment the need to build new forms of protections and industrial rights is self-evident. This is why we have commissioned research to develop a national system of portable entitlements.

The nature of work has changed. But the right of every worker to a paid day off to recover from illness, to take care for their sick child or elderly parent should not be the price that workers pay for that change.

We know that many of today's jobs will be displaced by technological change in the future.

We know that many workers will move in and out of different industries. Are we set up for that? The answer is that currently we are not. Our current structures and our forms of membership are not designed for inter-industry churn. And if we are prepared to fight for portable entitlements should we not also fight for portable membership?

To address this idea we will need to look at the interaction and relationships between unions across industries.

There are already discussions going on out there about amalgamations. People have been going for coffee on their first dates and some have already been booking chapels and celebrants.

Wouldn't it be good if we worked towards ensuring these were done with consideration to the best strategic "fit". Amalgamations based on personalities, politics, or ALP politics may not deliver the best outcomes. If there are good strategic and operational reasons to amalgamate, such as cultures, supply chain alignments, skill bases and/or economies of scale than as a movement we should look to support and encourage them.

Amalgamations must be about maximising growth not managing decline.

Recently I have been asking union leaders how many of their members have never met an organiser? Who have never taken industrial action? Who's only contact with an official has been via the newsletter? The estimates are often staggering.

Why do these people continue to be members? What drives them? How do we engage them so they not only stay members but help us grow membership in their workplaces, industries and professions?

Despite the rumour of our decline we are too big to have had regular one on one conversations with every member so to answer these questions we are considering conducting a large research project, not polling, of members, potential members and former members. We can only do that with your help and support.

There are lessons we can learn from each other here in this room and lessons to be learned from others both in Australia and overseas. The issues we are confronting are not unique to us.

We will be conducting an overseas study mission later this year which will give us the opportunity to learn all that we can from the successes and the failures of others. Europe, the Nordic countries, Asia and the USA all have examples of innovation in unions, and other organisations, that we should look at and consider if they are applicable here.

There will be many initiatives to consider. I want to encourage everyone to engage in frank and honest debate.

Our biggest challenge is not royal commissions, productivity commissions or federal elections. These things come and go. We must ensure that we are here to see those things come and go. Our challenge is to grow our membership. Growing is the only way we will build power.

To help drive growth across the movement we need to work collectively. Share information, pool resources, skills, expertise and help each other apply it in new innovative ways.

We have the tools, knowledge and experience at our disposal.

I am committed to using my time as ACTU Secretary to building our movement. We shouldn't be afraid to experiment. Try new things. All ideas are welcome. Even if they don't get taken up let's put them on the table.

The urgency of our situation cannot be overstated. Living standards are under attack. The role of unions in society is being fundamentally questioned and not just by our opponents. The way work is done, the exponential growth of digitization, the march of globalisation and the nature of employment has changed and continues to change more rapidly than ever before. And I note that today governments around the pacific are signing the TPP which further erodes the sovereign rights of people to demand decent work.

We need some radical thinking, we need to debate the pros and cons of membership models, we must embrace technology to empower workers and spread inclusive prosperity, we have the opportunity to engage with new groups of members and align our structures to their realities. We must act.

I know some of you are probably sitting there thinking, "We've heard all this before. You'll be showing us scary graphs and giving dire predictions and then we'll leave here with a nice communique that goes nowhere"

Well let me lay your fears to rest. That's not the case.

Our key outcome won't be a communique. This work doesn't end when we leave here tomorrow.

We are proposing to establish six taskforces to look at the issues and ideas on improving organising, how we use technology for building power and improving workers lives, what sorts of regulations and policies frameworks

do we need to put in place, how do build our capacity as organisations to best engage, organise and represent workers, what kinds of alternative membership models exist and how they might apply to us.

How we set up the taskforces will be covered in more detail by Sally and Scott tomorrow. I will say that we will resource them and properly support them.

They will be required to report to executive and tasked with finding, developing, evaluating and piloting ideas to improve and strengthen our movement.

These are not intellectual exercises but real tangible ways and means of doing what we have said we will do.

Build union membership, build union power and build a better future.