



NEW ZEALAND COUNCIL OF TRADE UNIONS
Te Kauae Kaimahi

CTU Biennial Conference Opening Address

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Wednesday 25 October 2017

E ngā mana, e ngā reo, e ngā karangatanga maha, tēnā koutou

This conference is about us creating our future.

It is imperative that we put in a big effort to do that.

Creating our future means being the authors of our own destiny and not leaving it in the hands of others.

Only we can represent the views of working people – that's who we are.

And we have a responsibility to do it in the very best way we can.

Doing the best we can means grabbing the opportunity with both hands and forcefully setting out and winning commitment to a future that will make NZ a better place to work in and a better place to live for the working people of this country.

We have to recognise that we need to adjust our activity – that means moving from:

- Just defending to progressing our cause
- Just standing our ground to advancing our interests.

This demands from us that we articulate and win people – workers and ultimately government and business - to our view and our perspectives.

And that will require us to say much more than just what we are against – but what we are for.

We have to articulate a compelling vision for good jobs and a better deal for working people.

A compelling vision for NZ as a great place to work and to do business.

A compelling case for unions that people will listen and buy into.

At the last CTU biennial conference we talked about framing and getting our message across. We've made some progress but we still have some way to go on that because it's not easy.

Our enduring values of freedom, equality and solidarity are strong and timeless.

We need to be strong advocates for the work that our members do.

For the dignity of work. For the inherent value of work. And for workers being experts in the work they do.

And it's not just the what we want – it's the how we want it – how we want change to be done.

Because the how requires real dialogue not imposition.

We need a proper discussion – where we have real participation in decision making.

In short we want real democracy where we can express ourselves freely and negotiate the change.

This needs to happen at a national level, through tripartism involving unions, business and government.

It needs to happen at an industry level, where we can bring our voice to the table and talk about our needs.

And it needs to happen in the workplace, in a new culture of work that respects the voice of the workforce and their union.

We need a new workplace culture that:

- rejects the mentality of command and control,
- that allows genuine and open discussion

Only then can union members achieve real dignity and respect at work.

In short – we need a fundamental shift in the relations of production so that working people have a much greater say in how work is performed, and have much greater control of their lives at work.

New Zealanders have shown they are ready for this change.

A change of direction that puts people ahead of profits, and rejects the dogma of the free market.

And as the trade union movement, we are very well placed to be central to this change.

We have the people, the ideas and the determination to put things right where they've become so wrong – in the workplace where working people have been denied a fair deal for nearly a decade.

And outside of work where conditions for working people and their families have become intolerable for many.

Up until days ago, the CTU (like many of you) was working all the time with two options in front of us - Plan A (change of Govt) & Plan B (no change).

And I know all of you this room are more than a bit excited because we can ditch Plan B and concentrate on Plan A.

Plan B has been hogging the limelight for too long. Make no mistake, we've achieved heroic results under Plan B conditions, but now it's time to stop tacking upwind and start foiling downwind in a relatively straight line.

None of us should be kidding ourselves that it's going to be a cake walk and that we can go on auto pilot. Nothing could be further from the truth.

We'll have to work hard to maximise any gains we can make.

But there is no doubt - some of our key priorities look to get an immediate boost.

Yesterday we had the announcement of an increase to the minimum wage to \$20 minimum an hour.

That's real money in the pockets of those most in need and a great signal that the new Government intends delivering gains to those who most need it.

In equal pay we now have a PM who understands and is committed to building on the momentum of the Christine Bartlett case – not undermining it as the outgoing Government were planning to do.

Jacinda Ardern, Tracey Martin and Jan Logie all spoke up strongly in the house against these deplorable attempts by the Government to dump the Equal Pay Act.

There are many other things that just months ago were out of reach for us, but can now be a reality.

Front and centre of course is a change to our employment relations laws which are so in need of re balancing.

We've worked hard to bring together our thinking and win opposition support to it on this issue over the last couple of years. This will now pay off.

In the case of the ERA –it's about making it what it should have been in the first place, introducing Industry Standard Agreements and a raft of other improvements.

We've got strong ideas on improving H & S law, and a raft of other laws related to security of employment.

In the state sector we have a unique opportunity to press for better behaviour from employers –to become a sector that is an exemplar of good employment relations.

We've had a good reception to our thinking from Labour, NZ First and the Greens on all of these policies.

But let's not make the mistake of relying solely on the law to solve our challenges. This isn't simply about changing the rules.

Fixing the law on its own won't be enough.

We know there'll be plenty of opposition so we'll have to push hard.

And we have to push hard for better terms and conditions of employment.

No one is going to just give it to us.

Clearly in NZ we have a real problem in getting our fair share.

Wages have gone nowhere, while profits have been fat. We are working harder and longer, but certainly not smarter or more productively which is a serious problem for longer term success.

Restoring collective bargaining is the only way to address the low wage problem. Currently only 1 in 5 workers can be said to have

their employment agreement set by real negotiation, because only 1 in 5 is covered by a CA. The rest are generally told in take it or leave it. Or worse, they don't even have an EA at all.

We have a big job on our hands reminding people of what's possible.

Just last week business commentator Fran O'Sullivan was imploring the incoming Government to keep business friendly settings where they are.

Make no mistake that includes keeping working people down too.

She went so far as to say that 'business will be concerned if there is any increase in collective bargaining'.

Have you ever noticed that all of this talk in the media about collective bargaining never seems to mention that CA's produce better wages and conditions of employment?

That more successful countries than ours do more collective bargaining we do?

Clearly we could do with a fresh perspective – a new conversation that was more balanced.

A conversation that replaces the dominant voice of the business community which consistently pushes ideas don't suit us –

Smaller government / less regulation / reduced public services/ lower wages, less unions rights/ higher house prices and speculation.

I know we've had enough of hearing the same old tired arguments. We saw them again loud and clear during the election campaign. We heard the usual dirty tricks and brazen scare mongering about alternatives.

The reaction to the idea of a working party on tax was especially disappointing. NZ seems unable to go near a decent debate and discussion about these things without business doing its Chicken Little act.

We clearly have a serious problem with the way we collect taxes – the current mix is unbalanced – it means that it's only workers who pay their share while so much wealth creation through speculation or corporate greed is overlooked and ignored.

We seemed to have forgotten that tax is a way of sharing, of pooling our collective resources for the common good and a way of making sure wealth is spent on public investment in public/ education/ health services and on infrastructure, on the socially important – people centred things.

It's not taking money out of the system where it mysteriously disappears – it's putting it in the right places.

But perhaps our biggest and most pressing challenge is the issue of the FOW.

Grant Robertson led a really good initiative with the establishment of the FOW commission, in which the CTU played an active role.

The future of work can look daunting if you believe some of the commentators making predictions about AI and new technology. Add to that the combined forces of climate change, demographic change and globalisation and it's obvious we can't bury our heads and hope it all goes away.

We're no strangers to large scale change – good and bad - and we shouldn't pretend we can accurately predict what will happen – but we'd be foolish not to prepare ourselves for what is coming.

It's crucial we actively engage the social partners – business and government – in working out where we want to get to and how we get there from here.

That's how we can create our future in the future of work.

The biggest single determinant of the impact of the FOW won't be climate change, globalisation, IT or demographics – it will be us and just how we respond to it.

The future holds both real threats and opportunities – done wrong we could be looking at a dystopian outcome with enormous joblessness and insecurity.

Done well and we could eliminate much of the dangerous, boring and repetitive work and share in the benefits of increased productivity – better incomes and less hours on the job.

The FOW provides an ideal framework for the union movement to engage with business and a new Government on an agenda that is people centred, involves a just transition and in so doing leaves no one behind.

We know that this will involve a clear and active role for the state in terms of:

- providing security and support for people in change,
- ensuring good employment relations law and
- providing strong and effective industry policy and leadership for investment.

No doubt all of this is going to be a massive challenge for Unions – just how do we organise in a new economy where the very foundations of work have changed? This is a top priority for the union movement here and abroad.

Last week I attended a symposium at the ILO about the Future of Work. Much of the ILO's work is anchored in the UN Declaration of Fundamental Human Rights including the right to Freedom of Association – to join trade unions - and the right to collective bargaining.

What was sobering at this symposium, was the great deal of concern expressed by many about the world slipping back into a 1930's

mentality – a pre-war mentality that exhibited intolerance and fascism and was devoid of respect for human rights and respect for democracy.

What was being said is that unless we treasure and respect human rights – especially the fundamental human rights including freedom of association for workers – to join unions – and to collectively bargain – we remove an important and essential ingredient of democracy.

The ILO also holds dearly to the notion of social dialogue and is built on tripartism between the social partners – government, business and unions.

ILO Director General Guy Ryder spoke very directly to this and said that ‘it is a contradiction in terms for anyone to support social dialogue and at the same time not support collective bargaining ‘.

He was making the point that real democracies support FOA, collective bargaining and respect civil rights to protest and strike, but you’d think by what some commentators say here is that industrial action by unions is somehow off limits and immoral and corrupt.

We’re talking about exercising our human rights here – it’s in the countries where you can’t strike where we should be more concerned.

While we all take pride in NZ’s achievements – I can’t say I feel too confident about the way we in NZ respect these basic democratic freedoms in our workplaces.

The reality is that large numbers of working people are actively denied union representation and they are made to feel they’re not entitled to exercise these rights.

Let’s face it - many NZ employers are generally pretty hostile to unions. They see us as some kind of threat.

When it comes to their staff joining together in union for support, protection and voice, they feel nervous and very often actively oppose it as though it's a sign of management failure.

It's like they think it's disloyal for staff to join a union.

I'm sure we've all heard employers with their mission statements and their HR strategies saying that they value and respect their staff, while effectively denying them the right to join an independent union.

But you can't really show respect to workers paternalistically in a one sided top down relationship.

Working people have to exercise their will freely themselves and they can only do this when they work in union.

The truth is that successful organisations and societies have cultures that allow people to build their own voice, create their own sense of identity and take responsibility for their own decisions. That's what democracy is.

While on the whole the business establishment tends to be stuck in the 80 and 90's in its thinking, on the ground they cover the full spectrum, from the good to the bad.

At one extreme we've seen our sisters and brothers in the MWU under attack in the meat industry by Talley's who seem hell bent on the eradication of unions.

Whole communities wilfully divided by corporate bullying and illegal lockouts. They are not alone. Everyday many of you encounter anti worker and anti-union responses. Sometimes it's blatant and other times it's a subtle undercurrent.

Look at SaveMart where FIRST Union did a heroic job in support of a workforce that was being badly mistreated and dared to speak up

about basic health and safety – they asked for gloves while sorting through bags containing used needles, excrement and other material amongst the clothing donations.

And when these workers were ignored they dared calling the union for support and it nearly cost them their jobs.

They were separated from other staff who weren't in the union and they were threatened with dismissal. Talk about freedom of association – it's hard to imagine a worse example and this is NZ in 2017!

I bet we could go round the room and most if not all the affiliates here could tell us similar stories. But we shouldn't generalise. And there are some good stories too.

Take E tū, AMEA and the RMTU where they are representing workers in Air NZ and KiwiRail. These employers have spoken out about the value of the union – about how respecting their staff means respecting their staff's union. And about the enhanced organisational performance they are getting when people work in union and in a culture of respect and dialogue.

Beyond the workplace there are some big issues to resolve.

The new Government has inherited a pretty sad state of affairs despite what the business pages and editorials in the media have been saying.

The trouble is there isn't a balanced report card.

We need a much more comprehensive account of the state of our nation reported to the public than the narrow set of figures we get now in the so called 'opening the books' PREFU exercise.

We need to really lift the bonnet and get a far more balanced account of the social and environmental state of our nation alongside the economic data.

So that the public can see their experience of life better reflected and really gain a sense of how we're going before they vote.

Because the social and environmental deficits and unmet need are shocking and need a light shone on them. Sickening suicide and incarceration rates, a housing crisis, overrun health, education and public services, poor R & D investment, polluted waterways. To name a few.

So it's been two years since we were last here at CTU conference and it's been pretty eventual.

In very good and in some not so good ways.

And I want to start by acknowledging the good - more than the good – the monumental.

Who could have believed we would have got a National-led Government to shell out \$2billion via union negotiations to spend on the lowest paid most undervalued workers in our society?

Congratulations to E tū for taking this case in support of the wonderful Christine Bartlett. But I also want to put on record our gratitude to Peter Cranny – the legal wiz who won the legal arguments in court. (not to mention his heroics across the movement)

And the genius of spreading that deal out to a wider workforce and bringing in alongside E tū, the NZNO, the PSA and the CTU. Sensational.

And the thing is – we got more than money – we got members. Not satisfied with just getting pay equity, the unions insisted on being

able to approach all of the workforce as part of this deal. In other words, they kept their eye on the prize of building union organisation.

You can hear more about this in one of the workshops tomorrow.

We've also defeated zero hours agreements, where workers can no longer be required to be on call without guaranteed hours.

Zero hours are an international scourge, and when people in other countries ask me about it, they often start off by saying 'I thought you had a conservative Government that didn't like unions!

I tell them it was a product of a great campaign that begun with Unite union exposing brilliantly the scale and reality of the problem and it eventually involved a really well coordinated campaign by the wider movement.

I know that these are two outstanding examples of great things we've achieved in the past two years in an adverse political environment.

I also know that beneath the headlines there has been wonderful achievement by affiliates across the board, from the brilliant NZEI / PPTA education campaign fending off bulk funding, through to the H & S Awards RMTU has been getting for worker participation. Unions everywhere are making a big and positive impact.

There's obviously been some not so good things happen in the last couple of years – none more so than the death of our previous CTU President Helen Kelly.

Let's enjoy our next two days. It's important we use this time well to be bigger than the sum of our parts.

For us to use the umbrella of the CTU to bring us together to have a bigger impact than we would otherwise.

Because when all said and done – we are here to maximise our impact, our influence and our power to change the world– not just to observe it.

We are here to and create our future.

Thank you