

Speech - Joanne Kerr

THIRTY-THIRD ACTU CONGRESS

HOW ATTITUDES CHANGE -

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER

UNION INVOLVEMENT

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Speech prepared by

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Thankyou Comrade Chair

As an Aboriginal person who has lived in Sydney for my entire life and in this Year (1993) the for Indigenous People I would like to welcome ACTU Congress Delegates, International Visitors and Visitors and Observers to Sydney to the 33rd ACTU Congress. I'm a member of the Public Sector Union and am honoured to have been given the opportunity to address Congress.

Someone once said "Life wasn't meant to be easy" and neither has our struggle been towards equality in the workforce.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have had to fight for most things in life that non-indigenous people appear to take for granted. Our struggle began with white colonisation over two hundred years ago. When our lands were stolen and with this taking of the land, the decision that we the Indigenous people of this country had no right to ownership of the land. The land has always been at the centre of our struggle, the centre of political, social and industrial demands.

There have been steps over the last 12 months to redress our dispossession with the High Court decision on Native Title - recognition that we did own this land and that it was not "terra nullius" as was written in white mans history. We still have a fight on our hands but with this Decision it is one step closer towards recognition.

The Union movement has been involved in our fight for justice for many years and one of the most notable examples of trade union commitment to the fight was at Wave Hill Station in 1966, when 200 stockmen walked off the cattle station demanding better pay and working conditions from their British Employers, Vestey's. The Gurindji people's action was a protest not only against their working conditions but also a claim for their traditional land. These people were employed in the pastoral industry - working on their own traditional land and working under extreme conditions for little more than rations.

The Gurindji People were given support by the North Australian Workers Union which worked strongly for the rights of Aboriginal people working within the Cattle and Mining Industries.

Twenty years later, under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act they were granted inalienable title to the station land with funds provided by the Land Fund Commission.

It is hoped that Union involvement, support and backing will continue to assist our battle for Land Rights especially in light of the High Court Decision on Native Title.

Early Australian trade union history is characterised by very little evidence of involvement in the interests of Aboriginal Advancement. This has changed for the better and we are moving towards a more enhanced future.

The historical developments of trade union movement, centred on skilled or artisan trades located mainly in the capital cities, this meant that very little contact was made with Aboriginal workers who were located in remote parts of Australia.

Although, the initial period of union activism for the Aboriginal cause was slow and isolated. One of the most significant developments revealing a more co-ordinated and mature approach towards Aboriginal problems, occurred in June 1977, with the formation in Sydney of the New South Wales Trade Union Committee on Aboriginal Rights. (TUCAR).

TUCAR has since this time been developing links with the rest of the trade union movement, together with providing advice to the ACTU on its Aboriginal Policy. Despite the efforts of TUCAR the involvement of unions in Aboriginal issues during the 1980s still remained very low. However, this is not to suggest that the union movement had been totally inactive. In November 1986 ten unions actively supported an Aboriginal crane driver in a case for payment of award wages. This case received a fair degree of publicity, not only because it was a test case which threatened to cost the Queensland State Government \$4 million in back pay, or because it centred on an Aboriginal Reserve in the Premier's electorate but because it was well supported by the union movement generally.

Although the support for this case indicated a degree of commitment by unions, it is the broader area of social issues including land rights, health and education where the evidence is not so flattering. A more co-ordinated approach needed to be taken on Aboriginal issues and this is the reason that an examination of the role of the ACTU became critical.

1983 witnessed a more comprehensive ACTU policy presented to the Congress. This policy urged for greater co-operation and concentrated on a range of Aboriginal Issues. In particular the policy identified eight areas requiring specific attention, wage discrimination; employment; education and training; general welfare; housing; land rights and collective enterprises; the right to self determination; and the restoration of the National Aboriginal Council.

The ACTU policy whilst exhibiting a maturing of understanding, still did not go far enough in producing results. And this was acknowledged by Bill Kelty in an interview with the Financial Review in April 1986 - entitled "Union Role Criticised".

Mr. Kelty was quoted as saying: -

"I must be frank - the trade union movement has made the nicest speeches and adopted the nicest positions (regarding Aborigines) but we've fallen short on achievement"

The '89 and '91 strategies apart from reaffirming previous policies also included the recognition of prior ownership, which in itself was a major step, new strategies have begun to exhibit signs of a much more enlightened and sophisticated approach to Aboriginal Issues. In addition to expanding on the elements outlined in previous policies they also provide particular emphasis on consultation and co-operation with Aboriginal Organisations. The acknowledgment that these groups must have a major input into the policy of the ACTU is a reflection of the more progressive theory of self determination.

And with this acknowledgment the ACTU's should be applauded for its progression and commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and this is not only reflected in its strategy but also in initiatives such as the Movement Towards Award Wages for people working within Community Organisations, the employment of Aboriginal Employment Officers in all Capital city offices of the Trades and Labour Councils and the establishment of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employer Association in Melbourne.

We have come a long way, now we have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Strategy to build on, one which reflects the real needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this country - Please let this commitment continue long in advance of this year - the Year for Indigenous People.

I will finish with this quote from Warwick Neilly - a former organiser from the North Australian Workers Union

"Unions must, of course, continue to struggle - and struggle hard - for the wages and working conditions of their members. But there are broader issues confronting Australia today and in the future. It is in the hands of the labour movement to do something about these issues."

Thankyou.