

INTRODUCTION

Thankyou for invitation – apology on behalf of Paul Bastian – unavailable to speak.

I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their Elders, past and present, and the Elders from other communities who may be here today.

My name is Steve Murphy. I am the Assistant State secretary of the AMWU, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union.

I have held this role for the last 4 years. I was an AMWU Organiser for 8 years in Newcastle and Queensland, prior to this role.

I started work as a Fitter, working for Tubemakers / Onesteel in Newcastle, where I joined the AMWU over 18 years ago.

My education is a Trade Union education. I learnt about politics and how to represent the interests of working people on the job.

It was my workmates that inspired me to get active and to fight on behalf of workers to make a difference and to build a better life for all of us to enjoy.

Industrially the fight can only take you so far. While improved safety, wages, conditions and agreements in the workplace are important gains, they can be quickly lost wherever there is inequality. We know there is inequality in our workplaces, industries and in our communities across the country

We need to think in terms of the type of behaviour we walk past is the behaviour we accept. If we allow our neighbour to be exploited, then it is only a matter of time until we are exploited ourselves, by the same people.

WHATS IN IT FOR ME

I have been asked to give a short presentation on;
The your rights at work campaign; and
The Fair Work Act.

There are strengths and weaknesses in the Fair Work Act, but its all relative.
When you start from such a low base (workchoices) improvements are easy to point out.

Why this is important?

We are facing similar attack on working conditions and rights, but with a more sophisticated approach. These attacks on will be deeper than IR.

These attacks must be defeated and we must have a plan to defeat them.

BODY / INFO

To discuss the your rights at work campaign, we have to discuss the reason for it. It was Workchoices. The 3rd major wave of IR reform from the Howard Govt – started in 2005. These changes were reflective of the Liberal Party policy back in 1997 that they were not able to get through the Senate. But with a Senate majority they took advantage of the opportunity. From the time it was first spoken about, it drew National attention.

We entered a National, public funded publicity campaign by the government and media. All up they spent \$121 milion of tax payers money to tell us this was good for us.

\$121 million on workchoices propaganda, including promotional material such as 98,000 mousepads, 77,000 pens and 100,000 plastic folders.

OPPOSITION

Strong opposition came from community groups, Unions and State Labor Governments.

Notably, the Catholic Church wrote a report apposing many of the reforms and their effects on families.

Protests started in 2005.

On 15 Nov 2005 protests against IR reform drew over ½ million people.

In NSW we held a rock for your right event, supported by some of the biggest names in Australian music industry. – Joe Hockey claimed at the time that the trade union movement had to put on a concert to get any support. But opposition to workchoices was growing rapidly.

In 2006, protests in over 300 locations, held around the country, screened live from the MCG drew massive crowds and National Media attention. This changed the campaign from ‘worth fighting for’ to ‘worth voting for’. It shifted the campaign from a traditional industrial campaign to a political fight.

If you had to be critical of the YRAW campaign there was a missing step – ‘worth joining for’. To spend \$40 million of Union members money on a campaign that didn’t include growing the Unions, in hindsight, is a major flaw in the plan.

The strengths of the YRAW campaign were clearly its grassroots campaigning network. Local community organisations, Unions and progressive political parties coming together to change the country. It built a sense of ownership of the issues, problems and the solution.

Opposition to Workchoices, went from being not on the radar, to one of the three biggest vote drivers at the 2007 election.

It’s a critical error that we allowed for the YRAW campaign to stop after the 2007 election and for our grass roots structures to be allowed to disintegrate. This takes significant shine off the achievements and requires significant resources to rebuild.

EASY TO RUBBISH THE FAIR WORK ACT

It’s no secret that Trade Unions did not get everything we wanted with the Fair Work Act. Some of us even took to labelling it ‘Workchoices Light’ as it did not go anywhere near enough to pull back the power given to bosses under workchoices. I am guilty of it myself.

But it sells what we did achieve short.

The Fair Work Act restored the rights at work for millions of Australian Workers and their families. It represents a major step forward from the excesses of Workchoices, which placed millions of workers in vulnerable employment, undermined protections and led to real cuts to the value of minimum wages.

BIG BUSINESS WILL NOT GIVE UP

We should be under no illusion, that even these gains are always at risk.

Big Business wants to hand power back to employers to dictate pay and conditions to workers.

Workchoices IS a major part of the Liberal Party’s DNA. It’s what they believe.

Unions must be prepared to defend the Fair Work Act from these attacks, but also to build on the advances of the Act, so it does deliver for all working Australians.

We need to build on the structure of a fairer, more efficient workplace relations system, established by the Fair Work Act – not allow a step back into the recent dark past of Workchoices.

CONCLUSION

This time around the approach is not just about whether or not our wages and conditions are affordable, but about turning back the tide on all the gains we have made over the last 40-50 years.

Whether it be job security, penalty rates, voluntary overtime, rates of pay, Medicare, workers compensation, superannuation, retirement age and pensions, affordable education and the list goes on - these attacks on workers and their families get more intense, much deeper and more troubling.

We are living in a time where there has got to be change. We've got to be part of determining what that change looks like. I'm here to tell you that It's OK for us to defend our jobs, our industries and our achievements.

If political parties say that they won't support workers defending these, then those political parties either need to change or know they will not have our support.

When govts say that it is unlawful for a worker to defend these, then that govt and those laws are wrong and they need to be changed.

This is a time where the standard we have struggled so hard to build can either be undermined, eroded and then taken away or we can fight to protect it, then fight to build upon it.

Our strategy cannot be about hoping the conservative just do so badly that Labor wins govt. There is no victory or achievement in that.

ACTION

What do we need to do?

We need to exercise our power.

There's two ways to exercise power;

- The first is money.
- The second is numbers.

Well we have the second one covered. But our challenge is - can we deliver our numbers when and where we need them?

Now I've been asked many times what a protest or demonstration will achieve. Well I'll tell you - it's marching feet that makes history.

It must be part of our strategy to achieve the outcome we are seeking. And turn these terrible conservative political parties around one way or another.

I look forward to working with community groups, trades and Labour Councils, Unions and political parties to building a movement that's both ready and courageous enough to fight for the type of society, and community that Australia is renown for. A Fair Go for All.

But we can't do any of this without a strong, united and determined Union movement.

Thankyou for your time this evening.

- Steve Murphy, September 2014