

**Speech by Ged Kearney to *Union Strategy Research Group*
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I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and pay my respects to elders past and present.

Thank you for inviting me to speak this evening.

Since I took on the role of President I have travelled the country first on an election campaign, and more recently on an exposure campaign. It has been important to me that I meet people in the movement and to familiarise them with me and my ideas.

At least that is what I thought I was doing. As I reflect on the last few months I realise that it is me who has been familiarised with the movement.

I have encountered passion, I have heard disillusionment, I have seen structured campaigns enthusing activists with sophisticated messaging, and I have seen dulled disconnectedness and anger.

I have spoken with non-union members and wondered how to tap into their worries and hopes with union ideals and collective fortitude.

I have spoken and met with employers and peak bodies and worried endlessly at their pursuit of individualism and their blatant market fundamentalist tactics; at exorbitant CEO salaries and profits at the expense of decent work, collectivism and community development.

I have watched and worked with a Labor government in total flux, torn between the demands of the neo-liberal world dominated by corporate interests, and the needs of working people for whom decent work and strong social infrastructure are vital necessities.

And I have wondered at the prospects of the new minority government with independents and Greens on the cross benches and holding the balance in the Senate.

For five months I have been feeling my way, putting out feelers, popping my toe in the proverbial waters. Almost 5 months in and I find myself stopping for breath, looking for time to reflect and to plan. I find myself asking “what next”? and “How”?

I have had a great response from all corners to my call for an independent voice for unions that speaks for workers and for an active civil society. There is a feeling that the movement needs independence from political machines, even the one borne of our own movement.

Whilst I understand and support the traditional ties with the ALP, and grasp the fact that we need to promote and value a major political party that has progressive policies and ideas, there is something encouraging and even exciting in the fact that union people are wanting a voice of their own again.

It is almost possible that an independent voice will lead to a regeneration of our movement - where we are once more setting the agenda or at least forcing the politicians to respond to us, rather than us simply giving support to decisions already made in some back room.

I feel a murmuring and an energy that we haven't seen since the *Your Rights at Work* campaign. We, the ACTU, lost them there for a while, but I sense the way back. We need to grasp that murmuring and turn it to a roar.

The first step is to invigorate our own. Motivate our activists. That means reconnecting, educating and inspiring them.

The second step, is to connect with non-members and grow. That means thinking outside the square - for both members and non-members work has been transformed, they don't live in physical communities outside their work any more - we need to find new ways to attract and engage them.

The third step is to build a policy and campaign capacity, within the ACTU and across the movement. That means not being afraid to promote good ideas, daring to lead debates, being strategic and using our resources effectively to maximise outcomes on key issues.

So - the first step - our activists. We need to ask - who are our activists? Where are they? And what is important to them?

We also need to ask - who is the workforce? What motivates them? For what reasons would they join the union?

We are a broad church.

Our blue collar unions have been our political strength. They have and continue to fight the political and industrial fight with passion and vigour. They are wonderful. Always there, staunch and reliable.

Many are disillusioned with the Labor government over legislation and policy that is, they feel, bordering on anti-worker, anti-union. Issues like the ABCC and the failure of a Labor Government to move our industrial laws in line with ILO Conventions on issues like bargaining and the ability to take lawful industrial action in support of economic, social and environmental issues, burn deep. Remember, the protests in France against new pension and retirement age requirements would have been illegal here.

But I also see that their industries are changing. Traditional employment models are disappearing. Migrant workers from Korea, Vietnam, China, Bulgaria, are moving into the traditional blue collar workplaces. They are employed by labour

hire firms. Their understanding of unions is miles away from the reality of the Australian union, and many know nothing of unionism at all.

They are isolated by their employers and precarious employment contracts, by language barriers, and immigration laws. They are a challenge. But they are also part of our future.

Then there our white collar unions - teachers, nurses, finance sector workers, shop assistants, community workers. They are women, they are often concerned with broader social issues, they value their craft and social and professional advocacy. And they are joining unions. They now constitute the overwhelming majority of the union movement and by 2020 over 50% of the union movement will be women.

To a degree, however, they are under-politicised and I think, undervalued by the movement. An untapped resource. But they are our future.

There are others, especially younger workers, many unpoliticised, connected to each other through technology - energetic, enthusiastic, not averse to activism but disconnected with unionism and often unaware of the value or possibility of decent work.

Many of them consider long term membership of a union as old fashioned. They are perhaps more likely to be engaged by spur of the moment actions around a campaign - perhaps that is why *GetUp* has been so successful and we, as a movement need to learn those lessons. Because while long term, committed activists are important, every single act we get an individual to make in a campaign, strengthens that campaign and makes it more likely to succeed.

They are also an important part of our future.

So where do we start?

We all know we live in a neo-liberal world dominated by market fundamentalism.

A world where the hallowed term 'democracy' has come to mean the right to make as much money as possible without the interference from the state and without any reciprocal responsibility to society.

The market dictates that wealth and shareholder value is the ultimate goal. Big wealthy corporations rule the world. And we, the individuals, conform to their rules. WE dress in fashions dictated by them, we eat what they tell us, we work to their rules, education is even driven by them and the needs of their industries.

Railing against corporatism is tantamount to heresy, whereby one is alienated, sidelined, sacked, called a union thug, or worse un-Australian, loses friends on Facebook, is bullied or driven to extreme behaviour.

Take the case of Ms Jane Kelsey, a wonderful New Zealand union and political activist here at present touring Australia alerting us to the pitfalls of the Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement - a free trade agreement with the USA by another name. She has edited a book about the impacts of the FTA on Australia and NZ.

She has travelled to Australia many times, eight times this year I believe without any trouble and has passed through immigration without a visa thanks to the trans-Tasman agreement.

The reason for this trip has been publicised, she has not hidden the intent of her tour and why should she? But for some reason this time she was detained at the airport. She was interrogated and eventually let into Australia but has been told in the future she will need immigration clearance. She will most likely have to apply for a visa.

Now I love a good conspiracy theory, but one has to wonder at this extraordinary event. Are we really becoming so entrenched in the corporate world that criticism of the ultimate protection of corporatism, the FTA, is being restrained?

Robert Reich, is an American writer, and political commentator. And served as the United States Secretary of Labor under President Bill Clinton.

He has argued that turbo-charged corporate competition, fuelled by consumers and investors seeking the best possible deals from anywhere in the world, has generated severe social problems.

But governments were failing to address them because big corporations and Wall Street firms were also seeking competitive advantage over one another through politics, thereby drowning out the voices of ordinary citizens.

The answer, he says, is to keep corporations focused on making better products and services and keep them out of politics. "Corporate Social Responsibility" is essentially forbearance from activities that undermine democracy.

But no-one is listening - FTAs are a means for corporations to rule the world!

And as a nation we are beginning to restrain such criticism.

It worries me. But I have hope.

Reich also says that "Unionization is not just good for workers in unions, unionization is very, very important for the economy overall, and would create broad benefits for the United States."

The Australian union movement has 1.9 million members. We are the only organisation in Australia that can boast that many. And we are growing. Do not let anyone tell you that we are irrelevant. We removed a government, we removed a Prime Minister, and we can mobilise when we put our minds to it.

Many commentators are now saying that the union movement is the only effective voice of opposition to the current economic forces. 2 millions voices: if we can get them all talking at once we can make a great deal of noise.

Mobilising 2 million people and recruiting more is not going to be easy.

I think there are several issues in relation to mobilising activists and members.

The first is to excite them about what we do. British sociologist Richard Hyman wrote a seminal work in the mid 1970s on strikes. By the 1990s he was wondering aloud about the state of the trade union movement and why it had plumbed the depths it had. Among a number of key issues he raised I want to highlight two.

The first was that unions had been perceived as being self-interested and protecting vested interests. Of course that is part of our job - to protect jobs and conditions. But he argues that much earlier in our evolution unions had wielded two swords - one the sword of vested interest, but the other sword was the sword of social justice.

Somewhere along the way, probably as social democratic governments hit their stride in the 70s and 80s, we lost the balance between those two complementary objectives. To a large degree I think he is right. It think the union movement has to be seen as fighting for broader rights and a decent society, just as our forebears fought for shorter hours, or for Medicare for all, or against fascism.

The second issue is how workers engage with the work and workplace. Hyman raises this issue, and it is an issue Robert Reich has discussed at length, in relation to the transformation of work. A far greater proportion of workers are performing abstracted work where they are in charge of complex decision making. It stands to reason that engaging them requires different skill sets and approaches. We have to convince them of the intellectual strength of our position and treat them not as a number but as a respected individual. 21st century workers aren't necessarily going to be impressed with mid 20th century union methods of communication.

Allied to this is that much of our unionism is simply about fixing industrial matters. Many unions visit the workplace every year or so and occasionally fix an individual problem. However, more workers are now engaged in professional or technical work. They have invested not only time and resources but their own identity in their profession. Unions need, as Hyman urges, to find ways to add value to the working lives of their members - not just at bargaining time.

Perhaps this is why some professional and craft unions, like the ANF and ETU, have weathered the storms a little better than some other unions over the past 20 years. While I reject the view that we should hide our industrial and union role, there is also a strong role for unions to play as advocates for the trade or profession. By doing that we build confidence and credibility with our membership and another reason for people to join and be active. Besides, the professional and industrial intersect at many levels. I think of nurse or teacher workload issues - they are both professional and industrial issues.

One other factor that needs to be taken into account when we talk about engagement and activism is that union communities need to be rethought. Decades ago people often lived around where they worked - the docks, the abattoir, the brewery or the factory. Today people are much more mobile and live across the city and travel. Unions have lost the link, in most cases, to physical communities.

However, people are now finding new ways to form communities - such as Facebook and Twitter - which are relatively new but seem to have been in our lives forever. These forums provide an opportunity to form new communities. *GetUp* has shown us the power of activism through the net. They are no substitute for face-to-face, on the street activity, but they are a way of connecting and engaging and we should use them more.

Last but not least is education. Education at different levels - for activists, for members, for the wider community. Before the 80s, in the union movement we had a more vibrant political landscape where people had come from the CPA or SPA or other left traditions. Political education and political economy was taught in workshops and after work.

I recall reading about the Victorian Socialist Party and the Socialist Sunday Schools of the pre-WW1 era. Since the demise of the left and the end of the cold war there has been a generation of unionists and activists without that education - especially the ability to place their specific circumstances in a wider social and economic context and to understand that to change their circumstance we need to change everybody's circumstances.

I could talk for some time about what needs to be done here. The ACTU has been successful in getting the states to put some millions into a trade union education fund. But the purposes and curriculum are tightly proscribed to understanding the Fair Work Act and the bargaining processes. We need a worker education that is far broader and resources that link to our campaigns that educate both activists and members. This education and information is an important foundation for getting members and activists to be more active.

The third issue I raised was a capacity to develop policy and campaign strategically around those issues.

Conversations will be critical and the language we use even more so.

Our economic and social language has moved into the realm of the neo-liberals. Social constructs that protect us from corporatism and the free market have been carefully framed to make us believe they are bad for us or have been demonised - that includes unions, taxes, regulations, even wages.

We constantly hear of wage pressures, of tax and regulatory burdens. We have had it drummed into us that unions are bad for the economy that we are conflict-ridden, and are all thugs.

We are driven by images that back this up. Television and the other visual media are used widely to drive those messages to the point now where they are part of the norm. Wayne Swan uses the term wage pressure in his financial reporting, the reserve bank uses it, our governments are obsessed with reducing regulatory burdens and we vote for the party who can drive taxes down the most.

In any industrial conflict there is always only one guilty party, the union.

We have to change that. We must reject it widely and loudly. As activists we have to start using a different language and promote the other side of economics, the side that stands for collectivism, for strong social supports, for appropriate government regulation and intervention, and for the fair distribution of wealth - a fair share.

One wise man, called John Ralston Saul, wrote that the 'best hope for regeneration of language lies not in academic analysis but in citizen participation'.

He argues that change lies in the awakening of the individual's sense of social responsibility. And the best way to do that is to tap into the humanist experience.

What is that experience for our members and future members? Right now I believe two things affect them most - the nature of work and equality.

We have a conundrum in this country where those in full-time secure work are working themselves to death, doing unpaid overtime, not taking leave, and stressing with trying to balance work, home and caring responsibilities.

On the other hand we have a growing and worrying trend towards precarious employment. More and more, work is structured around casual employment, short term contracts, or sham contracts. Frighteningly, less than 50% of the workforce is now in full-time on-going employment.

The financial risks once born by employers and indeed governments have been shifted onto individuals and households - described as financialisation. No longer can sick leave be taken for granted, or workers compensation, or holiday leave.

We are forced to pay for education and for health care, we have to manage our own retirement savings and justify access to social security.

That experience, often subliminal, is very real and during the election campaign it was the one issue that kept coming up in conversations I had in workplaces - time and again. And it shouldn't surprise us. When John Howard famously said he wanted an Australia that was 'relaxed and comfortable' it hit a raw nerve, because, guess what - very few people think they and their families are relaxed and comfortable! That's why the YRAW campaign connected so effectively.

We need to campaign long and hard around these issues again. Last time we campaigned around 'a working life and work/life balance', virtually the only

outcome was the Reasonable Hours Test Case and the clause now in the NES. This time we want much more - rights to convert to permanent work, incentives for employers to engage permanents, transportable entitlements and other mechanisms that limit the use of precarious employment to what it was intended for - seasonal or cyclical peaks and troughs.

On equality, well the gap between the haves and have-nots is widening. Wages as a proportion of national income is the lowest it has been since 1964.

This year profits in the private sector rose by 27.5% while wages rose by 2.7%. There is no wages pressure.

The gender pay gap sits at 18% and is rising. Female-dominated industries are critically undervalued and underpaid.

Our tax system favours the rich and disadvantages the poor.

Infrastructure and services for those forced to live in the less-expensive outer suburbs are sorely lacking.

These issues resonate with people. And we have to start the conversation about what we can do to fix them. I plan to do so by campaigning, on a big scale about these issues.

I am going to ask the union movement at large what they think are the priorities and then form messaging and a clear strategy for remedies.

I want to set an agenda around not just precarious employment, but also taxation, regulation, infrastructure, social supports such as health and education, and of course decent work laws.

For example, the Tax Summit around the Henry Review will be held mid-year and it is imperative that the union movement has a strong voice and presence. We have to advocate for a strong tax base and an end to the 'race to the bottom' on tax rates, both corporate and individual. We need to support the mining tax and have a view about the further widening of the tax base, without negatively affecting investment and jobs. I think issues like negative gearing and wealth or death taxes should be back on the agenda. In formulating these policies we need to educate and engage our unions and members.

I want to talk about economics on our terms, in our language, and tell people we can fight for an economy that works for them, not them working for the economy.

I want to promote images that tell the true picture, that women are unionists, that migrant workers are unionists, that blokes in hard hats are nation builders not thugs, that unions are a positive force for change, that we are a movement that is relevant, broad and proud.

Campaigning is the key. Campaigning around issues that connect with our members and where we offer real alternatives.

And who knows, we might just pick up a few extra members along the way.

Thank you for listening.