



SALLY McMANUS, ACTU SECRETARY

SPEECH FOR:

AUSTRALIAN WORKERS HERITAGE CENTRE

THURSDAY 9TH MARCH, 2023

Comrades, it is great to be here with you for this important event to support the work of the Australian Workers Heritage Centre.

I want to begin by acknowledging the Jagera people and the Turrbal people and to pay my respects to elders past and present.

As we all know, the Heritage Centre captures so much of the history of working life and the lives of workers in Australia.

But I don't think it dishonours any of the other wonderful exhibits to say that the beating heart of the Centre is its connection to and commemoration of the 1891 shearers' strike.

That strike centred in Barcaldine, has a cherished place in the history and the lore of our movement.

It was there, underneath the Tree of Knowledge, that the unionists of that time came together to organise the strike.

It was there that they gathered to draw on each other's strength to sustain their struggle against the combined might of the employers and the government.

And what was the strike about?

It was about the right for workers to come together in their union to collectively organise.

The right to bargain together to get a better deal.

It was about decent wages, some basic job security, and increased safety. These workers knew they could only get these if they stuck together and won them through their union.

And the bosses knew it too.

That's why the bosses tried to stop union bargaining and force workers onto individual contracts. "Freedom of Contract" as they called it.

The strikers of 1891 fought for their basic rights.

Their leaders were arrested in Barcaldine at bayonet point and forced to march through the streets in chains.

They were trialled and imprisoned because they stood up for these basic rights.

Though the strike was ultimately defeated, the actions of the strikers left a lasting legacy.

The strike is a reminder that our most basic and fundamental rights were never given to us.

They were fought for by successive generations of unionists, just like the 1891 strikers.

It amazes me comrades how similar the fights we have had in recent times are to the struggles of our predecessors in the 1890s.

For decades workers in our unions have been fighting tooth and nail for our basic rights.

Our right to collectively organise and bargain. Our rights to decent wages. Our rights to job security and health and safety at work.

I can't help but laugh when some of the employer groups and conservative politicians say that unions are trying to return to the past.

It isn't us, but the biggest bosses who have been trying to turn back the clock.

They have been trying to recreate the 1890s by driving down our wages, stripping us of job security, and attacking our collective right to organise. They have been trying on exactly what they tried in the 1890s because they know one fundamental truth: workers are strong when we stick together in our unions.

They have learnt the lessons from history.

And so must we.

We can't let the memory of our struggles be forgotten.

We can't let the story of how workers won the basic economic and democratic rights that we have today be written out of Australia's history.

This is why the work of the Australian Workers Heritage Centre is so important, and needs to be supported across the movement.

I wanted to share a story about our movement's history.

A story that shows how far we have come, how far we have to go, and how much we can still learn from those who came before.

As everyone here knows the 1891 strike was the most famous shearers strike of its time – but it was not the only one.

Throughout the early 1890s shearers across Australia had to fight tooth and nail against employers who were determined to break their union.

But they never did.

I want to read you a little part of a letter that was written in to the AWU's newspaper, the *Australian Worker* in 1939 by one of the strikers of the 1890s.

He wrote:

“I was a member of the Shearers' Union from the time of its organisation until I got too old for work. I am now 78 years old ... I was active in the Union in the year of the call-out, 1890, on the Darling River, and in the big shearers strike In 1894 I was on picket duty. I mention this and the fact that many others of my people have been loyal members of the Union as many are still, to show that the appeal I am about to make is to our brother unionists.”

The author of that letter was William Cooper, the legendary Aboriginal activist and leader.

Mr. Cooper had founded the Australian Aborigines League, one of the most influential political organisations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the time.

He had played a leading role in the Day of Mourning in 1938.

He had condemned Nazism and called for support for Europe's Jewish population when so many others were silent.

And he had spent years gathering thousands of signatures from Indigenous peoples on a famous petition to the King.

The primary demand of that petition was to grant "our people representation in the Federal Parliament..."

Mr. Cooper was a proud unionist. He made a connection between the strikes of the 1890s and the ongoing struggle for justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

He saw the fate of the union movement and the struggle of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as being bound together.

And so do we.

In 1939 Mr. Cooper was calling for a Royal Commission into the racist government Board that sought to control Aboriginal people's lives in New South Wales and denied them self-determination.

While his call was answered by individual unions and individual unionists, it was not answered by the whole of the movement.

It was not answered by the vast majority of our movement.

This is important for us to remember. For while our history contains our proud accomplishments it also contains our mistakes.

We need to remember both, and to learn from them. Because by being open and honest about our history, by accepting what we did wrong, this is how we learn to do better today and in the future.

60 years ago in 1963, the ACTU Congress adopted a far-reaching policy in support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's rights.

This change in attitude in the movement was the direct result of the activism of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers and unionists, supported by other comrades in the movement.

Activists such as Joe McGuinness, President of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and proud member of the Waterside Workers' Federation.

Activists such as Davis Daniels and Dexter Daniels of the Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights who would go on to play a central role in the wage equality campaign.

In 1963 the union movement pledged our support for the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This became our support for the 1967 referendum.

At that conference we also pledged ourselves to campaign for wage equality for Indigenous workers. A campaign that has lasted for many decades and is still going today.

30 years after that conference, in 1993, the ACTU hosted a major conference called Partners for Justice.

This conference was held in the wake of the Mabo decision and amid the push for Reconciliation.

Partners for Justice brought Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unionists together to discuss the major issues facing them, to have a forum in which their views could be heard.

Over two days of discussion, participants drew up an extensive set of policy proposals that were adopted at the ACTU Congress that took place later that year.

It was an act of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unionists coming together, bringing their knowledge to bear on the major pressing issues, and determining themselves what the best response would be.

A response that was then brought to the Congress, the mass democratic decision making forum of our movement, and endorsed.

In a speech prepared for the conference the legendary Indigenous educator, leader, and unionist Kevin Cook said that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander struggle for many generations had focused on “Recognition of our rightful ownership and of our desire to be custodians for our lands.”

And he called on the broader movement to work to genuinely understand this perspective, and to use this as the basis of our future learning and future action.

These are three vital moments of our history.

Moments that show how much has changed over time, as well as how much has remained the same.

It shows how much the union movement has changed as a result of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unionists taking action within our movement.

And this history shows to us the work that remains to do.

We are the inheritors of that history.

Inheritors of the victories, and the defeats.

Inheritors of the lessons, both good and bad.

Inheritors of the struggle that has changed in lots of ways over time, but at its core has remained the same.

The struggle for justice for working people.

The struggle for justice for all people.

The struggle to make Australia a fairer, more decent, and better place.

This year, I am very conscious, we have an opportunity to add to that history in the campaign for a constitutionally enshrined Voice to parliament for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This year we will write a new chapter of our history by doing everything we can as a movement to win this referendum.

I don't think there is a better way to honour all those who have come before us than to build on their struggles, and to win big in our time.

Previous generations of unionists campaigned to win rights not just for themselves, but to hand on to the generations that would follow.

Our responsibility to them is to do the same.



To learn the lessons of our history, we have to understand it.

We need to know about the unionists who built our movement, won our great victories, and who stood together and rebuilt after defeats.

But this is only possible when our history is being captured, and our stories preserved.

And so, I thank and commend the Australian Workers Heritage Centre for its vital contribution to this task and encourage everyone to dig deep to support them.