

May Day Celebrations Sydney May 1st 2005



Address by Andrew Ferguson

**Secretary
Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union
NSW Branch**

I thank the Sydney May Day Committee for the opportunity to second the toast to May Day 2005. The Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union has a long tradition of involvement in the celebration of May Day – International Workers Day. May Day provides trade unionists, communists, socialists and progressive people with the opportunity to celebrate the achievements of trade unionists, protest repression and attacks on trade union rights and living standards and identify future goals and strategies to advance our class interests.

Equally important it is an opportunity to protest the inadequacies of a social system which delivers misery and injustice for the majority of people in the world. On May Day we need to boldly declare our commitment to a new world order that will make proper provision for the needs of people. We live in a world where 3 billion people survive on less than \$2.00 per day with billions having no access to health, education or even clean water.

However, at the outset we need to remember the thousands of trade unionists who have been imprisoned, kidnapped, tortured and killed since the 2004 celebration of May Day. Our comrades in many parts of the world, most of who are unpaid trade union activists have been attacked for the same activities we do in this country. On 16th November last year 7 striking landless peasant farmers were killed by the para-military on the Hacienda Luisita picket in Luzon in the Philippines. 36 other peasants were wounded in this attack on striking workers. Since then over 100 political and trade union activists have been killed in relation to this dispute. From the Philippines to Columbia to Iraq our comrades are bashed, tortured and killed every year. We must uncompromisingly build solidarity and support for our comrades all over the world who confront this terror on a daily basis.

Unfortunately in this country we are now confronting an unprecedented attack on trade union rights. The very right of workers to have trade unions is under challenge. The government is intent in its current term of office to destroy the Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union and do considerable damage to our movement. Restrictions on the right of entry of union officials to workplaces and restrictions on trade union rights in respect of enterprise bargaining are aimed at undermining the ability of trade unions to organise and advance the interests of workers. The recently tabled Building and Construction Industry 'Improvement' (sic) Bill is an example of legislation targeting the CFMEU which will be applied more broadly to attack the Australian trade union movement

in future years. Under this Bill which will be retrospective to 9th March 2005 it is illegal for the union and its members to even meet, let alone take any industrial action unless :

1. The developer, builder and every employer on a site gives written permission before the meeting or
2. There is an imminent threat to the life of workers from sub-standard safety or 3 we are acting in accordance with the very restrictive procedures of protected action under the Workplace Relations Act.

It is illegal to even convene a meeting to take up a collection for Apheda or to have one minutes silence for a worker killed at the workplace. Under this Bill the union faces fines of \$110,000.00 for each and every breach and fines of \$22,000.00 for individual union members. On a site with a builder, 20 sub-contract building companies and 200 workers the CFMEU organising a meeting to discuss site or industry safety without permission, faces the prospect of \$2,310,000 in fines plus an additional \$4,400,000 for the 200 workers attending a meeting.

In the next few years some of our officials will be jailed. They will not be imprisoned for using balaclavas or baseball bats, but for challenging undemocratic and repressive anti-union laws. The jailing of union officials will not immediately generate the type of response that occurred following the jailing of Tramways Union leader Clarrie O'Shea in 1969. However over time the jailing of trade union officials for engaging in legitimate trade union activities will prove to the wider community that the industrial laws of the Howard Government are unjust. These laws are not only contrary to the provisions of the International Labor Organisation, but will be amongst some of the worst in the world.

With intelligent campaigning we will win over sections of the community that were previously unconcerned with the attacks on trade unionism. We need to campaign against the US style minimum wage system that will lower the wages for 1.6 million of the poorest paid workers in Australia. This low wage system will mean increasing sections of the workforce being forced to live in poverty. We face the same scenario as the United States where large sections of the homeless have jobs but are paid starvation wages. We need to expose the indecent attack on workers receiving \$12.30 per hour by the Howard Government and business executives receiving obscene salaries and companies recording record profits.

We need to boldly challenge restrictions on the right of entry of union officials by the Howard Government. We need to campaign for an expanded right of entry for union officials. We need a united trade union movement that passes resolutions for tougher safety laws and industrial manslaughter legislation to sanction rogue employers who kill workers. We need more imaginative, passionate and vigorous campaigning led by the injured and the families of workers killed. We need the same type of campaigning when companies go bust and workers are left unpaid without entitlements.

The trade union movement will need to be tactical in the forthcoming period. With just 22.7% of the workforce (17.4% in the private sector) unionised, we cannot over estimate our strength. In many areas we have unionised there is membership often on payroll deductions, but no industrial and / or political power for the trade union movement or the workers at the workplace. The CFMEU in NSW faced de-registration in the early 1990's. This followed an earlier Royal Commission by the Greiner / Fahey Government. During this period of attack we suffered many setbacks. Our financial membership collapsed to 14,000, we lost site allowances on every Sydney construction job and the NSW Liberal government successfully blackmailed employers into not contributing to the industry redundancy scheme or paying extra workers compensation insurance. However, we survived and rebuilt union standards. Our membership has systematically increased since the election of the NSW Labor Government in 1995. We have site allowances on every major building project in Sydney. Employers have contributed over \$582million into our redundancy scheme since it was re-established in 1994 and every month bosses in the building industry pay extra insurance to provide for 24 hour accident and top-up compensation insurance for 25,000 workers.

We are now facing the same challenge but by a more determined and resourceful enemy.

The CFMEU is aware our responsibility is not only to union members and building and construction workers for the next 3 years. Our responsibility is to generations of past trade unionists who since the 1850's have fought to build trade unionism and improve wages and conditions in the building trade. Our duty is also to future generations of workers for decades to come who have the right to decent wages and working conditions. We will not be provoked into mindless disputes which will guarantee the destruction of the union. The Howard Government is preparing to bankrupt the CFMEU and seize our assets and wind

up the union. We will suffer setbacks in the next few years but our duty is to defend standards to the best of our capacity but equally important survive to rebuild a tougher more effective trade union for the future struggle.

Whilst I have focused on an immediate challenge and agenda, I want to say a few words about our broader vision and responsibilities. The Australian trade union movement needs to be proud of our uncompromising opposition to the invasion and occupation of Iraq. In the past we did not have the same unity when the United States and Australia invaded Vietnam. We must join and strengthen the global movement for peace demanding the immediate withdrawal of all occupying troops and an end to the corporate plunder of the resources of Iraq by multi-nationals.

I want to acknowledge the presence tonight of the new Cuban Consul General Mrs Nelida Hernandez-Carmona and the Cuban Consul Mr Ifrahim Miranda-Leon. Our movement has a responsibility to defend the Cuban revolution. There are some in our movement that criticise the socialist government of Cuba in respect of human rights and imprisonment of political opponents of the revolution. Whilst I do not accept all these criticisms I respect their right to criticise. These critics however, have an obligation to compare and praise the achievements of socialism in Cuba, despite decades of economic blockade and sabotage by the United States, a country not plagued despite poverty, misery and starvation.

Finally I call upon all trade unionists to build solidarity with the revolution taking place in Venezuela. This country is the 5th largest export of oil in the world selling 1.5 million barrels of oil each day almost the same as Saudi Arabia. Despite this oil wealth 80% of the population have lived in poverty. The popular government of Hugo Chavez has won 8 national elections with sizable majorities in recent years despite massive US interference. A popular uprising on 10th April 2002 prevented a military coup deposing the elected government. The Chavez Government is re-distributing oil wealth and providing basic health, education and food to the people. Land is being re-distributed from the rich landowners to landless peasant families. We need to celebrate and defend the revolutionary processes underway in Venezuela. The Chavez government like Cuba is an inspiration to the poor of the world.

In 1998 the United Nations Human Development Report on Global Inequality reported that the richest 225 people in the world had a combined wealth greater than the combined

annual income of the poorest 2.5 billion in the world. We must fight not just for trade union rights but a new social order.

Long live May Day.