

ADDRESS TO MEETING OF UNIONS NSW SYDNEY CRAIG EMERSON, MEMBER FOR RANKIN 29 SEPTEMBER 2005

After my appointment as Shadow Industrial Relations Minister in 2003 my first public speech was to a meeting of Unions NSW.

At that meeting I said that any legislation introduced by Tony Abbott as IR Minister was likely to be extreme and against the interests of the working people of Australia - and if that was the case, Labor would oppose it.

Well, true to form, all the legislation Tony Abbott introduced was against working people's interests and we opposed it. And we convinced the Democrats to oppose most of it - so most of it was blocked!

Drunk with power.....

That was before the Howard Government got control of the Senate. Now, drunk with power, it is determined to push through its extreme industrial relations agenda.

I am here with you today to demonstrate, with my Labor friends and colleagues in the Parliamentary Labor Party, our solidarity with the union movement in its hour of need.

The union movement is in the fight of its life and we're in it with you.

Not for a hundred years has the union movement been subjected to such a vicious and concerted attack.

Why does the Government target union members?

And so we must ask: why does the Government target union members? Why does it explicitly target nurses, hospital workers, child care workers and teachers in its so-called Better Bargaining Bill? What has it got against hospitality workers, cleaners, shop assistants and metal workers who choose to join a union? Why does it attack the CFMEU and other building unions here in NSW? Why does it deny these workers the civil liberties enjoyed by people who might have information about suspected terrorist activities?

When the Sydney Olympic facilities were built ahead of time and within budget, everyone was happy - except the Federal Government, which has attacked the CFMEU here in NSW ever since.

THREE REASONS WHY THE HOWARD GOVERNMENT KEEPS ATTACKING UNIONS

The first reason the Government is attacking the union movement is that John Howard knows that if he can destroy the union movement he can destroy the Australian Labor Party. He knows that better than most – including some on the progressive side of politics. For John Howard the real target is the ALP and he's happy for the union movement to get caught in the crossfire.

But there is a philosophic reason too. John Howard has entered vulnerable Australians into a race to the bottom – competing on wage costs against China and other countries of Asia. It's a race we should never have entered. It's a race we should never want to win.

Labor wants to enter working Australians into a race to the top – of high skills and high wages. That's why Kim Beazley today announced plans that will lift the skills of our school students.

John Howard knows that if he dismantles the support around the pay and working conditions of vulnerable Australians, companies can drive their pay and conditions down and take market share off companies that are trying to do the right thing. And that will force those good companies into a race to the bottom to try to keep hold of their market share.

This week Professor Mark Wooden said he doesn't support the Government's industrial relations agenda. Until now he has been a strong supporter of deregulation, but he reckons Howard's going too far.

Instinctively the Australian people know the Government's plans can't be good for them. Losing hard-won working conditions and protections can't be good for them. This is what the Government calls flexibility.

Today the Government won a High Court battle that will allow it to spend \$20 million of taxpayers' money on propaganda, trying to convince Australians that its extreme plans are good for them. But the people won't buy it. This battle will be settled in the Court of Public Opinion.

There's a third reason the Government wants to press ahead with its extreme industrial relations agenda. John Howard told this year's Liberal Party Convention that it is an article of faith for the Liberal Party. John Howard was saying: we are who we are. And although the Liberal Party supports big business, this hasn't stopped people voting Liberal.

And so Labor must say: we are who we are. We are close to the union movement. We were born of the union movement. And I have never seen Labor lose elections because of our bonds with the union movement.

The Liberals are who they are. We are who we are. We should say so.

Time for solidarity

The ACTU and Unions NSW are running very effective and successful campaigns against the Government's extreme agenda. Congratulations to both of you. And this week the ACTU held a very successful three-day conference attended by 850 union delegates.

This is a time for solidarity. It is a time for solidarity with the union movement. The Party is with you. For in the words of that old song: "The union makes us strong!"