

TWU National Secretary Michael Kaine – National Council Address, Darwin 2021

Thanks everyone for joining the national council, here in our vivid northern capital.

The Territory is a magical place. You really can connect with Indigenous culture, practice and country.

And to that end I acknowledge that this conference happens on Larrakia land, over which sovereignty was never ceded. I pay my respect - and importantly that of our Union - to traditional owners and to elders, past and present.

Darwin is pretty hard to beat at this time of year.

Sunset beaches, curried mud crabs, and the don't-knock-it-til-you've-tried-it, breakfast laksa.

Of course the Territory is also known for its ferocious crocodiles.

Well councillors, the TWU knows a thing or two about crocodiles.

After all, on a regular basis we've had to deal with Alan Joyce.

But I'd like to think we produce a few of our own as well.

So just be careful there's a couple lurking up the back there - Senators Sheldon and Sterle. They fight as ferociously as crocs and we're glad we have them on our side.

Councillors, we last gathered two years ago in Cairns, literally only a few hours after the 2019 federal election.

And while many were licking their wounds at Scott Morrison's unexpected victory, the TWU came out strongly the very next day with bold plans for change. Plans for 2020.

Of course we didn't know then that what was to come would prove just how significant the election loss was.

Months later, a deadly, unknown pathogen jumped from animals to humans. And everything was turned on its head.

Those early weeks of the pandemic were a whirl of confusion... sometimes white knuckle panic.

But when person to person transmission was confirmed in the final days of January it really changed the equation.

It demanded a big call from our union. Suspension of flights to and from China.

In the heat of January 2020, this seemed drastic..

But when it comes to your life or your job, well there really is no contest.

It took a while for the Prime Minister to grapple with this challenge, given the resistance of corporate Australia.

Eventually he heeded the public interest and common sense of putting health first.

But that episode set an unfortunate pattern of the pandemic.

An unwilling Prime Minister dragged to the national interest by trade unions, social activists, clinicians and commentators.

Against instinct. Against inclination.

Remember Brendan Murphy and Scott Morrison playing footsie with so-called 'herd immunity'?

For a while there, they really thought the best course was to let the virus in and let it run.

They were telling everyone it was okay to shake hands and go to the footy.

Well within a week, most of the nation was in lockdown, borders were being closed and social distancing was under way.

And then after shuttering the entire economy they thought the best way to keep people fed and housed was to let them drain their superannuation.

One of the greatest acts of policy sadism we are likely to see. Intergenerational theft on a grand scale.

The history books tell us we finally achieved jobkeeper, a month *after* lockdown.

But I really hope the history books never gloss over the detail of *how* this was achieved.

Because Jobkeeper and Jobseeker simply would not have happened without the great Australian trade union movement.

That is to the eternal credit of people like you and those you represent councillors. People who spoke up, made a racket, demanded decency.

You see the conservatives and business leaders have spun a yarn of conciliation and co-operation. That hackneyed, tired phrase "we are all in this together".

But it's a fiction.

What's really happened, time and time again, is that social reformers, activists, troublemakers like us, have dragged the PM and the business community to a rational position.

We have saved them from themselves.

The South Pacific Miracle of Covid Containment was built by people like us.

Yet we have still copped the brunt of economic destruction.

There's a lot of talk of heroes and victims in this pandemic.

But despite their habit of self-congratulation, Greg Hunt and Scott Morrison are not heroes of the pandemic.

And my heart doesn't bleed for the business leaders and CEOs who had to forego a new range rover because they lost a quarter of revenue.

The real heroes and victims are people like Theo Seremetidis.

As the Pandemic reached fever pitch, Theo blew the whistle on Qantas' reckless safety practices.

Theo was concerned that workers cleaning planes coming from China were being dangerously exposed to coronavirus.

Qantas weighed in immediately with its usual bullying response. It stood Theo down and threatened to sack workers refusing to clean planes, stating the risk of transmission was "negligible".

A subsequent Safe Work investigation vindicated Theo. It revealed aircraft cleaners were forced to wipe tray tables with the same dirty cloths.

That they were handling blood, vomit, soiled nappies, used masks and tissues without protective gear.

In the middle of a pandemic.

Theo was never restored to his job.

In fact he's one of almost 9,000 whose livelihoods have been destroyed by the callous behaviour of Qantas and the indifference of the Federal Government.

This year Qantas will have hoovered up \$2 billion dollars in public subsidies while using the pandemic as cover to demolish its workforce.

And the Federal Government - demanded nothing of this company. It doled out the cash while the workforce was gutted.

Is anyone else fed up with the fawning tributes to business leaders like Alan Joyce who treat their workforce with utter contempt - an annoying expenditure, rather than a vital resource which, with training, decent conditions and – most importantly respect – can build a company to succeed?

It's not just aviation.

In fact, if you want to see corporate greed on steroids, look at the gig economy.

Now some people ask why we focus on the gig economy.

It's because it needs to be stopped in its tracks.

Otherwise it will ripple beyond food delivery and taxis to envelop entire swathes of the economy.

Consider people like Bijoy Paul - another hero, and victim, of the pandemic.

Bijoy arrived in Australia in early 2019. Throughout the pandemic, Bijoy helped many thousands of Australians to isolate and protect their health by delivering them food for Uber Eats.

We all remember those wild days. The 10pm prime ministerial press conferences, schooling kids at home, worrying about our jobs.

Coping with surges of anxiety about our own health and that of our families.

Well Bijoy helped alleviate all that by delivering food to people's doors.

He risked his own health, exposed himself to a deadly, unknown pathogen, to help the rest of us.

I'd love to ask Bijoy about those fever pitch days of the pandemic, interacting with restaurants and customers, acting as a go-between.

But I can't.

Because Bijoy is dead.

He was hit by a car on a November morning as he delivered McDonalds to someone in Rockdale, Sydney. Two days later, Ik Wong a food delivery rider from China was also killed.

They're among five delivery riders who have died in the last year. They're the ones we know about.

Their deaths represent a system that denies workers minimum rates of pay, sick leave, the right to challenge unfair sackings, training, protective gear and insurance.

A blatant contradiction of the working conditions generations of Australians fought for.

The gig economy has quietly established itself as an unregulated, secondary labour market.

But guess what, whether it's the gig economy, aviation or long haul trucking...

We are fighting back.

Two words define this union's work in the year past and the year to come.

Focused and determined.

On the gig economy we have relentlessly beat the drum. Brave delivery riders have told their stories.

We have protested, lobbied politicians and dragged the gig giants through the courts.

And in the dimmest of valleys, rays of light are cracking through.

Last month Menulog announced it would employ - *that's right* - employ riders rather than contracting them.

That means award rates. Legally enforceable rights.

This is a critical beachhead. And we will fight to secure it and advance further.

The time to put in critical reforms to lift standards right across the transport industry is now.

Because the push by wealthy retailers, manufacturers, oil companies and banks to lower standards isn't continuing at a moderate pace.

It is ramping up to a galloping speed because of the gig economy.

The likes of Amazon and Uber are aggressively entering our market, willing to operate at a loss for years if necessary, to undercut the competition and wipe them out.

And this is accelerating an already deadly downward spiral, a scenario where there is no floor for standards in transport; and there is no time called on the human cost in the drive for market dominance and obscene profits.

Amazon Flex is already operating here in Australia.

And Amazon Freight and Uber Freight will no doubt soon be pounding on the door, ready to enter Australia and attack good jobs, with decent standards that support working families at the likes of Toll, Linfox and StarTrack.

They will seek to replace these union jobs with piece work on an app where workers get hired on below minimum rates, and fired without warning by an algorithm.

Many in our industry get this.

We are working with good employers who want standards lifted and know it is wealthy clients which must pay.

And I was proud to stand with two transport industry bodies - the National Road Freighters Association and the Australian Road Transport Industrial Organisation - and tell a Senate Inquiry just last week that our industry is united in calling for this change.

Federal Labor gets it too.

Anthony Albanese has promised minimum pay and entitlements for those in insecure work. Under Labor an independent tribunal will set pay rates and conditions for transport workers, including gig workers.

Labor will also introduce portable leave entitlements, and it will cap rolling fixed-term contracts.

These commitments are **directly** inspired by the work of **your** union.

Fundamentally this is why we engage with politics - to build power at work.

It's also why we regularly engage with lawyers - almost as much fun as politicians.

We had a big win in the courts in recent months against one of our nastiest opponents, Aldi.

The wealthy retail giant tried to silence us. They attempted to sue us for speaking out against inhumane working conditions.

Well... all they did was inspire more protests at more supermarkets and even more stories on Channel 9.

Plus we wiped the floor with them in court.

Aldi and every other big company need to realise something.

The Transport Workers Union won't be intimidated. We will stand up to bullies.

We are doing the same thing now with Qantas in the Federal Court.

We are holding them to account for their duplicity and dishonesty in using COVID as cover to outsource and sack thousands of ground crew.

Elsewhere in aviation we are rebuilding our strength.

Working with our friends in Queensland Labor we have got Virgin back in the air as a full service airline that pays full wages.

And our broader aviation agenda of holding the economic employer accountable for wages and conditions throughout the supply chain is gaining traction.

The International Transport Federation has now adopted this model. Over time, fewer and fewer giants will get away with shunting their labour responsibilities off to a fly-by-night contractor.

Delegates, our union makes the powerful accountable. It is at the very core of our work.

Today I want to unveil our coming plan of action for road transport.

Despite all our work, we still have a way to go in civilising this industry and making it safe.

According to government figures 885 people have died in truck crashes in the last five years, 183 were transport workers.

One in six owner drivers feel they can't refuse an unsafe load and two in five don't report safety breaches for fear of losing their jobs.

We know the human impact of this. We know the widows. The children. The communities that lose football coaches and volunteer firefighters.

And we also know where this pressure stems from.

The major retailers who sweat the trucking companies and the owner drivers.

They are literally driving workers to their death.

Well, we say enough.

In June the enterprise bargaining agreements of all major trucking companies - including Toll, Linfox, StarTrack, FedEx - expire.

For those retailers who think they can keep squeezing transport companies and their workforces, think again.

You are about to face a winter of discontent, followed by a spring offensive.

We are serving a claim on all of you.

Some of these retailers are the biggest in the world and have all the firepower that comes with that: Amazon, Apple, Aldi. Others are well known domestic brands: IGA, OfficeWorks and Bunnings.

Some retailers such as Coles, have done a better job than others. They have opted for the gold standard.

Well, we will be holding them to that standard to make sure they don't slip.

The likes of Woolworths are more like silver.

They need to lift their game. And they can expect some colour and movement.

And then there's the likes of Aldi.

Well Aldi - and a few others - are the scrap metal standard.

And to those companies I want to issue a stark warning.

Prepare for sit-ins, protests and all manner of fun and games.

I am not threatening disruption.

I am promising it.

We will hold you accountable for the misery you visit upon families and communities. Until you sign charters and put in place systems that guarantee safety, respect and dignity, we will not relent.

Wealthy retailers like Aldi already know that the TWU builds and wields power strategically, powered by passion and solidarity.

And that passion is fuelled by a long term plan to build power in workplaces so that we achieve 70 per cent density across our workplaces by 2035. We are on track to achieve this.

Along the way we will right the wrongs that have been done to us and the transport workers we fight for.

Councillors, it's now five years since the road safety remuneration tribunal was abolished. Something must be put in its place with the capacity to include everyone at the mercy of unscrupulous bullies - whether they are long haul truckers, couriers, taxi drivers or food delivery workers.

We've been working to build economic power for transport workers for two decades. We have learned that there is no steady state for this industry - no status quo. The only option is to keep advancing.

As I said earlier, this union is focused and determined.

Most importantly we are united and ready to fight.

Thank you.