



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

ADJOURNMENT

Trade Unions

SPEECH

Thursday, 5 March 2015

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Questioner
Speaker Christensen, George, MP

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Mr CHRISTENSEN (Dawson—The Nationals Deputy Whip) (12:31): I want to speak today about the union movement. I have been a member of a union in the past—the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union. When I was 21, first job out of university, I worked in a print factory and had the union ticket. I also was a member of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, the journalists union, when I worked for newspapers. My father was a member of the Federated Clerks Union. My grandfather on my mother's side was a member of the dockworkers union in Glasgow, and I do not know you can get any more union than that. So there is union in my family history.

Unions do serve a role. Here is the 'but': they have lost their way. They have now become an activist and fundraising arm purely for the Labor Party, and we see little from the union movement other than that. Yesterday, in their 4 March protest, they were rebels without a cause. They had to 'march for' because the date was 'March 4', and then they had to make up what they were marching for. It was more about what they were marching against. They gathered outside my office. A hundred were expected; they were flat-out getting half of that there. But they were marching against things like unfair workplace contracts, potential changes to the minimum wage and potential changes to penalty rates. Well, no-one in this parliament is in favour of unfair workplace contracts. The Prime Minister actually said in the press last week:

We are not going to legislate the minimum wage or penalty rates. Nobody wants to see a lower wage country so that is not on our agenda.

I can assure I support the Prime Minister's motions. Further, I can assure you, as I said, I do not support unfair contracts in the workplace.

Actually, the labour movement, the union movement, would do well to note that the Leader of the Labor Party, when he was the minister responsible, put in the act that the Fair Work Commission would have to do a four-yearly review of modern awards and that one of the things they would need to review was penalty rates. So, if there is someone responsible for any look into penalty rates, it is the Leader of the Labor Party.

Unions have lost their way. They were out there supporting the carbon tax under the previous government, while businesses were struggling and having to let workers go. Infamously, the AWU leader at the time said that they would come out against it if one job was lost. I know plenty of local businesses that had to let workers go because of the increased cost of electricity during that period, and the AWU still supported it.

The CFMEU, the mine workers union, actually donated substantial amounts of money to the organisation GetUp!, and this organisation campaigns against the sector that employs them. Crazy stuff! They make excuses: 'Oh, that was the building division.' Too bad. They should have extricated themselves from that union when that payment was made. Workers' money is going to the unions, going to organisations like GetUp!, which are cutting their own throats. It is crazy stuff.

The litmus test for the union movement is this: forget protesting outside my office about things which are not going to happen and actually take up the cudgel and support jobs with me. I am pushing for the Abbot Point project, something that will create 650 jobs for their members who are out of work. It will create business opportunities and create extra indirect jobs through that. Support the approval process for the Abbot Point port expansion which the state government announced. If we can get that going, we can get jobs and we can get increased wages. That is something that the union movement should be for.

It is being opposed at the moment because we are going to put some spoil on a swampland. But that swampland was only created back in the 1950s by duck hunters. They diverted watercourses onto a dry patch of land to create a wetland so they could shoot ducks. That is the fact and any local will tell you that, including the Mayor of the Burdekin Shire Council, who was one of those instrumental in changing the watercourse. That is what the argument against the Abbot Point project is, in the main. It is a crazy argument when there are 650 direct jobs in the balance and many more throughout the Galilee Basin. If union support is not forthcoming, I will be

talking to the responsible ministers about democratising the union movement, deregulating the union movement and allowing new unions to set up which are going to do something for the workers.

I will praise a local. A Labor Party member in my electorate by the name of Dennis Bailey has gone out and set up a group called Labor for Abbot Point. There are union members who are backing that. But the unions themselves have not said anything. They have been silent about Abbot Point. Do not be silent! Our region's future depends on this, jobs depend on this and wages depend on it. Do something productive for workers. Union movement, please stand up and be counted on the Abbot Point battle.