

Trading Australia Away?" –
Speech by Doug Cameron on US Free Trade
Agreement

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Contrary to the theme underpinning Senator Conroy's speech, you do not have to be opposed to international trade to support fair trade.

The AMWU recognises the importance of international trade to our members' well-being and job security; nevertheless we have significant concerns in relation to the philosophy and practice which underpins free trade.

This is a historic night for the Labor Party; it is the first time for a decade that a Labor trade spokesperson has uttered the word "fair" in the context of the party's trade policy.

I congratulate Senator Conroy on this refreshing approach and look forward to including the word "fair" in the trade policy to be adopted at the National Conference of the party in January.

It is somewhat odd that every policy adopted by Labor uses the word "fair" profusely except the Trade policy. I look forward to working with Senator Conroy to change this significant anomaly.

Last month, busloads of manufacturing workers from Sydney, Melbourne and South Australia travelled to Canberra to protest outside Parliament House on the first day of the talks in the penultimate round of negotiations between Australia and the United States for a "free" trade agreement.

Standing on the steps of federal parliament talking to workers about the trade negotiations bought home to me one of the key truths about free trade.

Free trade is not for the benefit of ordinary workers, it is for the benefit of the political elite, the wealthy, the powerful and corporate interests.

Mounting an argument against free trade opens you up to political ridicule, and a concerted campaign to denigrate any critical analysis of free trade. The AMWU will not be intimidated by this approach.

Workers in this country have been lectured and harangued by the political elites about the benefits of free trade agreements.

And yet, if these free trade agreements are so great;

Why is the Australian public excluded from the process and denied details of the negotiations?

Why are the agreements negotiated in secret, and why is the parliament left

out of the process?

How can it be that the government can sign an agreement, for example, the Thai free trade agreement, without anyone, including the Opposition having any idea of what is included?

In this process, workers, who make trade happen, are left protesting on the steps of their own parliament, locked out of the process and the negotiations.

Why is our government so keen to hide the detail, and so reluctant to properly analyse the social, economic and community implications?

There are many definitions of globalisation and free trade floating about in the economic and political literature.

For ordinary workers free trade means, privatisation, competition policy, job losses, insecurity, casualisation, contracting out, a loss of industrial rights and conditions. This, coupled with a lack of corporate responsibility, accountability and honesty resulting in obscene executive salaries demonstrates to workers that the system needs fixed.

Ordinary workers feel a sense of powerlessness when the major political parties are at one on the issue of free trade and offer workers no practical choice or differentiation.

Proponents of free trade say that it is all about removing barriers - opening up the world to trade without borders.

This definition is actually a way of “sexing up” free trade - it defines it as a positive - as “removing barriers”.

Free trade is not fundamentally about removing global barriers - free trade is simply about removing the role of governments and allowing market forces to run unchecked in an economy.

- It is about saying that governments no longer have a role in delivering services to their constituents,
- they no longer have a role in promoting local industry and jobs,
- they no longer have a role in regulating to protect the environment, to maintain livable wages and safe workplaces,
- they no longer have a role in providing universal access to education or health or low cost medicines.

Our government is using the language of nationalism to send our young people to war in a country a long way away, and using the language of

nationalism to generate fear about 14 people floating in a leaky boat off our northern borders.

At the same time they are sitting at international negotiation tables trading away our nation's capacity to make decisions and policies that affect the economic and social health of our communities.

The really bizarre thing is the level of political consensus on free trade agreements.

The AMWU has commissioned credible economic research from the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research which calls into question the benefits of an Australian/US free trade agreement.

We only have to look at the Canadian, Mexican and US experience for working people to see that the reality of a free trade agreement does not live up to the promises.

A study by Industry Canada showed the job displacing effects of imports as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) meant that between 1989 and 1997 870,700 export jobs were created. During the same period 1,147,100 were destroyed by imports. This left a net deficit of 276,000 employment positions.

In Mexico, instead of improved living standards, resulting from the massive migration of jobs to Mexico wages and disposable income declined as a result of NAFTA.

According to the United Auto Workers, NAFTA has;

- Failed to improve workers rights and living standards.
- Failed to improve environmental conditions and protections.
- Failed to protect public health, safety and other public services.
- Failed to stimulate sustainable, equitable economic growth and development.
- Failed to protect the rights of citizens against corporate corruption.

After 10 years of NAFTA, workers in the US, Mexico and Canada have;

- Less job and income security,
- Less control over economic and social policies and,

- Less equitable income distribution
- Companies have moved hundreds of thousands of jobs to Mexico and millions of American and Canadian workers have been told that companies will move to Mexico unless workers accept wage and benefit concessions.

As one prominent Canadian union official said recently "you can hear the sucking noise of jobs disappearing to Mexico all over Canada"

Even the federal government's own Productivity Commission poured cold water onto the predictions of economic gains for Australia.

And yet, the political consensus is so strong that - these agreements will be so good, they will deliver so much, opposing them is like opposing the rising of the tide.

The Australian Labour Parties position on this is disgraceful.

Without knowing the details of negotiations, the Labor State Premiers, issued a statement publicly supporting the US free trade agreement at a crucial time in negotiations, when US negotiators were seeking to include the Pharmaceutical Benefit Scheme in negotiations.

Senator Conroy welcomed the Australia/Thailand free trade agreement without being involved in the negotiations or having even a basic knowledge of the outcomes.

This is a problem for my members and for the people who believe that the Labor Party is about providing policies and directions that deliver for working people.

How can Australians be confident that their interests will be protected against corporate globalisation when the ALP welcomes the Australia /Thailand Agreement at the same time as the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions issues a report which shows:

- Thailand has ratified only four of the eight core ILO labour conventions.
- Thailand is still violating all basic workers rights.
- There is insufficient protection against anti union discrimination.
- The right to strike and the right to collectively bargain are severely restricted.
- Child labour, forced labour, and gender discrimination are still prevalent

in Thailand.

- Many child workers come from neighbouring countries, working as domestic workers or in prostitution.
- Forced labour occurs in Thailand including the trafficking of women and girls for prostitution or domestic work.
- Women suffer extensive discrimination in employment and pay.
- Women receive lower pay for equal work in virtually every sector of the economy.
- Migrant workers suffered discrimination in sweatshop conditions.
- There is still the existence of debt bondage where whole families are held in indentured servitude.

The trade union movement does not welcome this Agreement.

The trade union movement believes the inequities, intimidation and exploitation which permeate Thailand's society should be addressed by ensuring human rights and core labour standards are included in the Australia/ Thailand free trade agreement.

Surely Labour does not support a free trade agreement based on exploitation and discrimination.

Next year the Australian people will go to the polls to elect our national government.

It is not an election I look forward to because I fear that we will once again face a campaign where security issues and refugees will again be used as a mask for fear and racism.

It is not an election I look forward to because I fear that we will have the Liberal government returned.

I believe that 4 more years of the Conservatives will entrench the social, political and economic changes that they have imposed on our community.

It is not an election I look forward to because I am not yet convinced that the party that should be offering an alternative to the Liberals has yet found its heart and courage to stand up to the fear and racism.

I also fear that the party has not yet understood its role and position, and has little ability to articulate to the public what it actually stands for.

The parties' position on free trade is a real symptom of this problem.

The party's position on free trade sends a signal that it doesn't know what the role of government should be in a globalised economy.

The party is in danger of signing up to the theory that there is no role for national governments in globalisation.

Let's be very clear about the way the Liberal party wants to reshape Australia.

They are trying to fashion Australia in their own image - that is, a group of people for whom privilege has bred privilege.

The clearest example of this at the moment is the changes they want to impose on our higher education system. They want to increase fees to a level that is going to clearly cut the young working class out of higher education.

It is the kind of change that means that even if the Liberals lose power, the system they leave behind will do their job for them.

They will leave behind a system that will entrench inequality and social injustice, a system that will ensure that those without capacity to pay will have their opportunities limited.

That's what the Liberals believe in - that is who they are.

They believe access to good jobs, good health and a decent education is a privilege that is inherited.

The ALP has been the party that has strived to make sure that opportunity is not just inherited.

That access to good quality education and health is not just available to those who can pay.

That good jobs, quality jobs are the right off all people -decent liveable incomes, workplaces that provide health and safety, workplaces where workers and their unions are respected and valued.

There are a range of policy challenges for the ALP.

- The ALP policy needs to make a strong commitment to the reform of the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF.
- We need a commitment to core labour standards in trade agreements.
- We need a commitment to parliamentary debate, scrutiny, and

approval for any free trade agreement.

- We need a commitment to undertaking proper economic and social analysis of the impact of free trade agreements.
- We need a Labor Party which delivers on its promise of a Nation Building Agenda and a New Deal for Australians.
- We need a Labor Party confident in itself, strong in its beliefs, courageous in adversity and true to its values.

I am looking forward to the National Conference where debates can take place on the future direction of the party.

We need a tax system that is progressive, fair and equitable, a tax system that ensures those who can pay do pay.

A tax system that ensures the big end of town makes a real and significant contribution to providing the social and physical infrastructure of this country.

I welcome Anthony Albanese's contribution to the tax debate which highlighted the need for Labor to provide increased and improved social and physical infrastructure instead of rewarding those who are already doing extremely well with further tax cuts.

Anthony, you have massive support for your position, the AMWU, the trade union movement generally and party members across the nation will stand shoulder to shoulder with you on this issue. Keep up the good work!

I welcome the opportunity to debate the key issues of economic policy, trade policy, health, welfare and education at the National Conference.

I welcome the chance for Labor to provide Australians a real alternative to the mean-spirited, divisive, sycophantic and socially destructive Howard government.

Let's see if the party has the courage, commitment, vision and strength to be the next Australian government.

Australia awaits Labors Nation Building Agenda and its New Deal.

Australia desperately needs a real alternative.

Contact Person: Doug Cameron
Contact Email: amwu2@amwu.asn.au