



UNITED FRONT TO WEATHER CHANGE

Opinion Piece by ACCI Chief Executive Peter Anderson and ACTU President Sharan Burrow “*United Front to Weather Change*” as published in the Australian Financial Review - 17 June 2008

Sharan Burrow and Peter Anderson Sharan Burrow is president of the ACTU and Peter Anderson is chief executive of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry

The response to climate change is a defining issue of our generation.

It is not for scientists alone, or environmentalists. Responses are likely to affect the whole of the community and whole of our economy. This makes it an issue for working people and for business people.

Australia may be the world’s largest island continent, but we cannot isolate ourselves.

When it changed government in November 2007, the Australian public sent a clear message to its leadership that it wanted its governments and leaders to be in on the inside of finding global solutions to climate change.

The dimensions of the issue were recently discussed by trade union and business leaders from the Asia-Pacific region, under the auspices of the Confederation of Asia-Pacific Employers. Although few union leaders or business people are scientists, it was widely accepted that a passive approach to the issue is out of the question. There are costs in doing nothing, just as there are costs in responding.

The Asia-Pacific is a region of tremendous industrialisation. There are some serious costs and risks depending on how we respond, especially if we cannot bring developing countries like China and India into the global solution. We have to be committed to doing things differently, introducing changes, but also be sensible.

The Asia-Pacific region is also innovative and has great expertise in technological development. New technology, new ways of working and new ways of doing business are going to be a big part of the solution. Our region’s capacity to innovate offers hope. Responses need to be measured, clear-cut, yet economically responsible. Jobs and the living standards of workers are affected on both sides of the debate. Our policy responses have to be jobs-savvy, as much as they have to be environmentally sustainable.

Business and unions have a common interest in sustainability, and also in jobs, especially in communities in carbon-exposed industries.

Given the stakes, and the buy-in of working people and businesses, this issue cannot be left to governments alone. Collaboration between business, unions and governments is needed if we are going to do the right thing by both the environment and jobs.

There are four steps in policy development that need immediate focus from unions and business.

With the signing of the Kyoto Protocol by the Rudd government, we now need to commit to a comprehensive multilateral agreement beyond Kyoto that includes industrialised and developing economies.

We need to influence the design of Australia's emissions trading scheme that the Rudd government proposes from 2010. This includes measures to address affordability and social justice issues, especially for low-paid or fixed-income people and families.

We need to work out how to provide the proper support for the carbon-intensive industries, to minimise impacts on jobs and economic activity. This does not mean get-out-of-jail-free cards for industries, but sensible measures in the permit system, as well as funds to aid cleaner production. And above all we need to invest in innovation and development of technology that make us operate businesses and work in a more sustainable way. This includes sharing that knowledge in our region, for this is a global challenge.

Beyond this there is much that working people and business people can do at a practical level.

We can look at work design. We can look at ways in our homes and workplaces to conserve water and waste, use alternative energy, and undertake some retrofitting.

It would not be a bad idea if our workplaces set up sustainability committees where managers and employees talked about ideas for producing or working smarter and with less waste, along the lines of the many health and safety committees.

We have some big decisions ahead on sustainability and climate change. We won't agree on everything. However, unless we think both locally and globally we won't be doing the right thing by the next generation of working and business people.

It is leadership that is required, and that includes greater collaboration between governments, unions and industry and our constituents, starting from now.