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# **The Inaugural Joan Kirner Social Justice Oration: I Have a Dream**

Communities in Control Conference  
Melbourne, 30 May, 2011

Presentation by

**Sharan Burrow**

**General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation**  
*Via Satellite*

**Sharan Burrow:**

Good Afternoon.

I very much regret not being with you in person to be part of this special tribute to Joan Kirner. Indeed, while it is protocol for me to extend greetings from the 175 million members of the ITUC worldwide, I have no doubt that if they could know Joan Kirner as we do, they too would greet her with the affection, respect and gratitude that you and I feel.

Joan Kirner has 'community' at the core of her being. Two months short of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' oration, it seems appropriate to recognise that Joan Kirner's dreams are simply a drive for action.

She walks, talks and breathes the values that we share, but more than anyone I know she has dedicated her life to generating the ideas, harnessing the policy and lobbying for the funding or the legislation to drive the change that makes our communities stronger, fairer and more tolerant.

There is no issue that matters to people, no area of policy that denotes social justice, that I can think of that Joan hasn't tackled at some point, so let me just touch on a few and put them in a global context.

Education has and will always be at the centre of Joan's passions. It is, as we all know, a passport to opportunity and the measure of a civilised society, that all people can pursue their potential. Yet in almost all countries it remains underfunded, undervalued as a political priority and still more readily available to those whose parents can afford to pay. Tragically, there are almost 100 million children worldwide who have no access to schooling and more than 200 million with scarce opportunity, as their childhood is stolen as they are forced into child labour.

The numbers of children and young adults who miss out escalates as we move through secondary education to vocational and tertiary provision with a gender bias that defies the civilised world.

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Then there is the lack of respect for the world's teachers who are blamed for most, if not all, of society's ills and too often denied the fundamental human right of freedom of association. Indeed, in the country that nominates itself leader of the free world, in Wisconsin and other parts of the US, teachers are being stripped of their bargaining rights, and in countries like Colombia shot for being trade unionists.

A civilised society that knows peace and prosperity with a commitment to opportunity for all will place a fundamental value on education, and it will be universal. Education at all levels – lifelong learning – it is at the core of social justice. Just ask Joan.

Beyond education it is the world of work which affords purpose, income security and a capacity for necessary production, for construction, for service or for care. The dignity of labour is all too readily forgotten in an exploitative commercial world. Labour is not a commodity, and the right to work is established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet tragically you no longer hear the world's politicians speak of 'full employment' as a priority for action.

The global picture is bleak. More than 205 million people, the highest on record, are unemployed. That doesn't include the millions of women not on the statisticians' books seeking to work either by choice or in desperation. It doesn't acknowledge the growing informal economy in all nations that is crippling the guarantee of secure work and a fair wage. Then there are the 45 million young people entering the labour market every year in economies that cannot accommodate them.

Youth unemployment, with the threat of a marginalised generation, is an issue for all nations. We have all witnessed live on our television screens the desperation of one young man that sparked a revolution in Tunisia and the responding call from other young people in Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Jordan, Palestine and many other nations. Liberation and democracy are central ambitions, but at the heart of the youth battle cry is dignity and jobs, jobs and jobs.

Employment, decent and safe work with a fair minimum wage and collective bargaining rights, underpinned by social protection: that's not a lot to ask. Yet, employment has been the greatest victim of the global financial crisis and, along with precarious work, given that more than 55% of the world's workers have some form of irregular contract of employment, is now

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challenging both security and social cohesiveness. Add to this picture the fact that some 75% of the world's people have no social security, and the figures of global growth mean very little in social justice terms.

A social protection floor that includes pensions, unemployment income, health, child protection, education for all, housing and sanitisation, would cost just a few percentage points of GDP for the most vulnerable nations. The world spent this and more to save the banks, but we are in a battle with the G20 and other wealthy nations to commit to this affordable attack on poverty, an approach that would also kick start vulnerable economies with an essential floor of demand.

The social protection floor can be achieved if the political will is there. It is frustrating that we have to remind wealthy nations that they built social protection systems when they were poor – coming out of the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War Two, political leaders constructed a social contract with their people. These systems of social security were not just support for the vulnerable but were also automatic economic stabilisers in times of downturns or crisis. Now, too many of the leaders of wealthy nations have forgotten their economic history and/or lack a commitment to global social justice; indeed many seek to deride and diminish their own systems and the people that depend on them. Nations are prepared to reap wealth from global trade but not to redistribute very much of it, even if that redistribution could assist to sustain the globalisation they defend.

But it is time for people to fight back and the unions, in partnership with key civil society groups, are mobilising toward the RIO Plus 20 Summit in 2012. For the unions we have determined that the three priorities for a sustainable future include the social protection floor for the poorest of nations, a financial transactions tax that will force the financial sector to share just a tiny fraction of their obscene profits in the interest of social and environmental justice, and green jobs. The world's political leaders need to be reminded that 'people' matter and our world can and must be a fairer place.

If you needed any motivation to take up this fight, let me remind you that the gap between the world's richest billion people and the world's poorest billion people has grown by 60% in just seven years.

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Apart from social protection, there is also the fact that wages as a share of productivity or GDP, in almost all countries, is the lowest for decades. Economic and social stability requires greater redistribution, and on top of a fair minimum wage a society without collective bargaining rights is at risk. You don't have to look to poorer countries to see the evidence of a denial of workers' rights. In the US, the collective bargaining coverage has fallen to 7% in the private sector with a resulting share of productivity that is threatening the capacity of not just the poor but middle-income America to pay their bills. This is economically insane as well as socially destructive.

Workers' rights, including the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining, have served our democracies and our economies well. Yet they are under attack in too many parts of the world, often by employer groups such as the American Chamber of Commerce, who have global tentacles but never sit at the bargaining table and who influence governments but never acknowledge the contribution both the labour and the income of workers makes to their businesses and to sustainable production and demand.

I spent May Day – May 1 – in Palestine, and the call from the workers in Ramallah, in Nablus, in Jericho and in Jerusalem for jobs, decent work, social protection, a minimum wage, an end to discrimination against women and for safe workplaces is the decent work cry of workers anywhere.

Joan Kirner has always understood the value, socially and economically, of workers' rights – the intrinsic value of the Australia of a 'fair go all round', and she has stood with and for workers on too many occasions to count: on the docks, in schools and childcare centres, with nurses, manufacturing, cleaning and construction workers and many, many more; for rights, for fair treatment, for equal pay and recently for the historic community sector equal-pay case. Not only does Joan tirelessly support workers, she demands justice for them, and I can attest personally to the many calls of outrage she has made to me, to other advocates, to newspapers and to politicians.

The world of work, my world, needs a thousand Joan Kirners, but sadly we have to settle for her inspiration and the guilt of feeling her on your shoulder from time to time.

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Then there are the gender wars. Equal pay I have noted, but equal opportunity, merit-based systems of promotion, representation, quotas and affirmative action – Joan, it seems to me, and I am sure to many in this audience, that eternal vigilance is the price we must pay to hold on to the precarious advances we have made.

There are some bright spots in the world, but when women in North Africa ask where to start with anti-discrimination laws; or when I witness in the next two weeks the governments who will oppose strong provisions in the debate at the ILO for a Domestic Workers Convention – even knowing wage discrimination is the least of it, with sexual violence and labour enslavement of too many women, especially migrant women that marks this work – work that is expanding with the increasing privatisation of care; or when I listened to young women from all the regions of the world recently in Amsterdam describe the issues of job security, childcare, equal pay, sexual harassment and access to healthcare as major issues for them, I know the fight is generational and still well and truly with us.

If there is a moment for the women in the audience to acknowledge Joan Kirner as the warrior for women she is and has been all of her life, please join me in applause right now.

Equally we can say the same of Joan's advocacy for migrant workers and her courage in standing up against the injustice still measured out to asylum seekers. I have taken a global frame for this contribution, but let me say that I have never understood the fear-induced politics of attacking the few thousand desperate people seeking asylum on Australia's shores.

It is true that we need a global solution for refugees and that all nations should share responsibility. But if we don't see a rights-based approach to migration everywhere, if we don't empty the refugees camps of today, how will we deal with the potential disaster of climate change and the millions more displaced people of tomorrow?

Life, human life, not just capital, must occupy the collective action of political leaders. The UN must assume greater responsibility for migration and demand of all nations a broader commitment to humanity and human rights.

While there is so much more, finally let me touch on the environment.

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An Australian colleague famously said, and I have appropriated it, that there are 'no jobs on a dead planet'. Just as Joan Kirner in her political role saw the need for massive land care reform, now we must tackle the threat to the planet of industrialisation. This requires a commitment to reduce carbon emissions and in union language 'a just transition' to a low-carbon future. There is no argument concerning the imperative, and with appropriate support for vulnerable groups, we see enormous opportunities to drive investment in technology, innovation jobs and skills that will establish the future economy even as it tackles the threat of climate change.

It has been appalling to watch the lack of political ambition and political will from the world's leaders. We don't have a choice if we are to hand on a planet that is sustainable to future generations, but witnessing the disaster of Copenhagen and the timidity of Cancun, you would think we do.

This is another struggle for the world's people to take a firm stand on. The impact is already generating increased poverty with the changes in seasons in the developing world. The increase in natural disasters will continue to escalate with the impossible cost to humanity, and the big polluters refusing to make the change will actually hit hard up against the barrier of finite fossil fuels.

A just transition yes, but strong climate action with no more excuses is critical. Australian leadership on a carbon price is invaluable as a solid start and must be supported. I wish you well in this quest.

So many social justice challenges, and yet Australia is better placed than most to take them on. Australian leadership is also important for the world, and the reminder of Joan Kirner's commitment to a more egalitarian world, where social justice and the common good are intrinsic national and international quests, can only drive us all to greater efforts.

I congratulate Our Community for the establishment of a social justice scholarship, and I salute the person whose name is attached to it – Joan Kirner – friend, mentor, sister to us all, but an inspirational activist and leader for whom the quest for social justice burns as brightly as it always has.

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I thank Carol Schwartz and the Trawalla Foundation for supporting this oration which I am sure will inspire for years to come.

Joan: inadequate as it is, thank you.

Viva Joan Kirner.

Solidarity.

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