

Union Making Workers Unemployable

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The AWU, through its leader Paul Howes, is arguing that nothing and, in particular, the introduction of a carbon price, should be done that would endanger the jobs of its members. This in essence seems a sensible position for a union to take and is apparently in the interests of those members it represents. That Mr Howes is making himself heard is laudable and I have no doubt that he currently enjoys strong support from the rank and file of the AWU. His argument however is short sighted and, whilst it may preserve jobs in the short term, is likely to consign the workers it represents to long term unemployment.

By shielding the high emitting industries from any harmful impacts of an emissions trading scheme, Mr Howes misses that point that these industries will inevitably go into decline. The whole purpose of emission trading schemes is to reduce emissions and hence move the global economy towards one that is both economically and environmentally sustainable.

A global carbon price is inevitable even if it is still a few years away. It is therefore not possible for high emitting industries to remain unaffected in the long term. Rather than seeking to prop up old industries in which his members currently work, the AWU would far better serve its membership base by strongly advocating for the development of new industries utilising clean technologies and for the associated training in cleantech skills.

'Cleantech' is term is being increasingly used to describe products and services that have both 'economic and environmental benefits'. Companies with activities that fall into the cleantech basket include renewable energy, water, waste and recycling, green buildings, energy efficiency, energy storage, biofuels and carbon.

The recently published Australian Cleantech Review shows that the current cleantech industry in Australia has revenues of over \$22 billion and employs over 25,000 workers. The sector is starting to become a significant generator of wealth and employment.

Australia's level of activity is however a poor imitation of some of our near neighbours. China, India and South Korea are pushing hard to take advantage of the future opportunities, economic development and employment offered by the sector.

This level of changing global activity and emphasis is not acknowledged by those seeking to retain the status quo. This lack of foresight will be to the detriment of both the employees concerned and of Australia's place in a future world. Can Australia grow to be more than just a quarry, a beach and a nice place to go to university?

Mr Howes and others have also attacked the banks for supporting deep emissions cuts on the basis that they cannot be trusted due to their role in the global financial crisis. The banks are of course looking after their shareholders as a first priority, but they are also looking towards the future and its opportunities rather than just protecting old cash cows.

The AWU stand is populist and weak: like the Chaser team it is certainly uninformed, although sadly probably not unconstitutional!

Those seeking to develop a thriving economy built on emerging sustainable industries find it bizarre that a group claiming to represent a wide variety of workers is not looking to support future employment opportunities.

However, Mr Howes may find that he has underestimated his members' intellect. He may find that his members decide they want to have a thriving future and that they do not want to be represented by someone without vision. Those forward looking workers will find employment in the industries of the future.

Whilst Mr Howes secures regular headlines for his outbursts, the AWU is failing to build a sustainable long term future for its members. The tactic appears to ignore the core purpose of the union movement and should be condemned.

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