

MEDIA RELEASE

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First conference of new union brings together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members; pledges support for Uluru Statement

More than 60 Indigenous members of the newly-merged Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union have gathered in Cairns to develop the framework for a united effort to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people achieve their aspirations as outlined in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Significantly, the first national conference held following the union merger earlier this year was a gathering of rank and file Indigenous members from a diverse range of industries — including building sites, mines, the waterfront, seafaring, manufacturing and forestry — and from all corners of the country.

The inaugural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Conference resolved that the union would campaign politically and within the community in support of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, in particular for the creation of a constitutionally enshrined First Nations Voice and a Makarrata Commission to implement the process of truth telling and treaty.

The conference also resulted in the formation of First Nations Peoples Committees, which will:

- drive campaigning efforts and the development and implementation of Indigenous policy across the union;
- promote and enforce strong workplace rights, while addressing exploitation of Indigenous workers;
- support employment, training and culturally-appropriate mentoring;
- engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and workers to build effective networks and support;
- work towards empowering First Nations people to affect decisions about their own lives;
- raise awareness with non-Indigenous members of the issues and challenges facing First Nations peoples, through an understanding of culture, history and respect; and
- address racism and discrimination.

Conference coordinator and secretary of the Northern Territory branch of the MUA Division of the new union Thomas Mayor — a Torres Strait Islander man who was born on Larrakia Country (Darwin) — said the newly merged union was determined to build on its strong history of supporting First Nations people.

“This conference was about bringing together our Indigenous brothers and sisters, hearing first-hand their experiences at work and in their communities, and taking that knowledge to build a national campaign that can lead to genuine reconciliation,” Mr Mayor said.

“By bringing together rank and file union members who know the issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their workplaces, industries, and communities, we were able to develop a strong set of policies and clear campaign outcomes to ensure our union supports the fight of Indigenous Australians, in particular for a constitutionally-enshrined voice for First Nations.

“The Uluru Statement from the Heart is not only a compelling and powerful expression of the desires of First Nations people in this country, but just as importantly it outlines achievable outcomes, including a constitutionally-enshrined voice to Parliament and the creation of a Makarrata Commission to carry out the process of truth telling and treaty,” he said.

“This is about so much more than symbolism, as the only way we can close the gap when it comes to health, education, employment and social outcomes for First Nations people is to ensure they have a voice that is genuinely accountable to them alone, not chosen by politicians, the Prime Minister, or the media.

“When our entire nation — black and white — comes together to enshrine the rightful place of First Nations people, then we will finally be on the path closing the gap.”

Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union national secretary Michael O’Connor said the union had committed its full support for the efforts of First Nations people to achieve constitutional reform.

“As part of our commitment, the very first national conference convened by our newly merged union has brought together Indigenous members to drive our efforts and ensure words are turned into action,” Mr O’Connor said.

“Our recent merger has brought together a range of progressive unions into one powerful body, each of which already had a long and proud history of supporting the struggle for justice by First Nations Australians.

“For too long, the Federal Government has insisted on imposing its will on Indigenous people, resulting in devastating, costly, and ineffective policies that have left Indigenous peoples suffering distressingly poor health, education, employment and social outcomes.

“The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of our union have seen that first hand, they know what it looks like in their own lives and in their communities, and they have the passion and energy to drive genuine change.

“This conference not only reaffirms our support for the creation of a constitutionally enshrined voice for First Nations people — one that can’t be silenced by funding cuts or have its membership determined by politicians — but it is about creating a plan of action that offers genuine support for this fight.”

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CFMMEU Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Conference resolution regarding the Uluru Statement:

The Inaugural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Conference of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union resolves that we strongly support the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

We acknowledge that the consensus at Uluru was a constitutional moment, a moment of national consensus and self-determination. We congratulate the participants at Uluru for their efforts in the face of many broken promises and divisive actions by Governments over many years.

We will campaign at all levels, including politically and in the community, to achieve its aspirations of a constitutionally enshrined First Nations Voice and a Makarrata Commission.