Artists Organise! Transcript
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Jen Mills: Welcome to Artists Organise! Before we begin I'm just going to introduce to you the fantastic Robert Taylor who is going to welcome us to Kaurna country. Thanks, Robert.

Robert Taylor: All right! Do I really need the microphone? Better use it. I love using microphones. I feel like Chris Rock up here on this little stage, I feel like a comedian. It's not every day I'm not behind a lectern, it's good.

[speaking Kaurna]

Ladies and gentlemen so the language that I just spoke to you is the language of the Kaurna people of course, the Kaurna people being the traditional owners of the land that we're gathered on here today, what we now call Adelaide, but of course it's only been called Adelaide for a short amount of time as I'll express but for thousands of years it's known as Tarntanyangga but these days it's been shortened down. Tarnta is the big red kangaroo and kanya means rock, so to Kaurna people and the surrounding tribes of this area it is known as the dreaming place of the big red kangaroo.

Kanya, there used to be a sacred stone down here along River Torrens, or karrawirra pari, traditionally known as. I don't like to use the term River Torrens, I think I have explained that to you fullas a few times, but for those of you who don't know it's actually been called the River Torrens after a man by the name of Sir Robert Torrens who used to be the chairman of the Colonisation Board back in the 1830s, so I don't like to use the term River Torrens because it represents a bad time in Aboriginal history here in our country. I prefer to call it karrawirra pari, the red gum river, or just simply the river.

So there was a sacred stone down here, kanya, being the rock. Unfortunately that stone was quarried out and over time now the name sort of changed down a little bit just to Tarnta and ngga, so you've probably heard fullas say Tarntanya or Tarntanyangga, I say Tarntanyangga because I still keep it to the traditional name of the sacred stone with the rock, but Tarnta-ngga, basically the Tarnta is the big red as mentioned and -ngga is on the end is just a suffix meaning in, on or at that place. So if you go up to Victoria Square you will see a sign up there saying Victoria Square, below it you'll see Tarnta – ngga, when you read that the -ngga, N-G-G-A is just a suffix. So basically it's just Tarnta, which is the dreaming place of the big red kangaroo, so the -ngga, meaning in, on, or at that place.

If you're going to or from it'd be Tarnta-illa, or Tarnta-anya, it just depends on the context of what you're talking about in our language.

So I said [speaking Kaurna] on behalf of my Kaurna elders and ancestors past present, it's a pleasure to be here today and I welcome you all onto Kaurna land. And by inviting me along here we together are acknowledging that this is the traditional land of the Kaurna people and for that I thank you.

So my name's Robert Taylor, if you don't already know me I come from four different Aboriginal groups, so: the Nganguruku, which is further up the river around Swan Reach area, they're actually part of the Ngaiawang nation which is part of a bigger group called the Meru people which extends from just on the other side of Renmark, up near Mildura, all the way back down to about where Mannum is, and then the Ngarrindjeri people, which starts about where Mannum is, all the way down through the Kurangk traditionally, known as the Coorong, down to Goolwa and Kangaroo Island. So a lot of people actually mistake the Riverland up near Berry and Waikerie for Ngarrindjeri country, but it's actually not Ngarrindjeri country up there, just got a strong Ngarrindjeri influence because of the missionaries, they moved them onto the missions from Swan Reach mission up to Gerard mission so there's a lot of Ngarrindjeri up there. I had a debate with my elders many, many years ago, and I won, it's good to be young and enthusiastic you know, so I won that debate there but you know it's got a big strong Ngarrindjeri influence as I mentioned, they are neighbouring tribes.

I'm also a member of the Narungga people from the Yorke Peninsula, you know, the foot, Narungga country and of course Kaurna country down here.

I've been in the community doing Welcome to Country now for quite some time, quite a few decades, and it's always an honour and a privilege to have the opportunity to come and share my knowledge with you.

So this place here Adelaide, for those of you who don't know, it was actually shown to Colonel Light by an ancestor by the name of Murlawirrapurka. Murlawirrapurka was an ancestor and he met Colonel Light, and to Colonel Light he said this is our special place, our place between the hills and the sea with a beautiful fresh water system running through the middle. And he said feel free to set up camp. But as I like to mention, I don't think he quite knew how long they were going to stay at that time.

So out of respect for the Kaurna people, Colonel Light, when designing Adelaide he designed most of the squares in the shape of a Kaurna shield, so if you actually look at the squares they are not square, they are in the shape of a Kaurna shield. Which actually architecturally works out good as well, but it's also not a coincidence. It was actually out of respect for the Kaurna people, and that's documented in the archives at the museum, that it was also meant as a sign of respect. Because when he met Murlawirrapurka, Murlawirrapurka was shown holding the Kaurna shield in his hand, and so if you look at the shape of a Kaurna shield and on Google now – we're lucky enough to have Google Maps, you can go on Google Maps and look down at the squares, and you can see that they're actually in that shape. So it's actually called a Murlapaka, named after him as well, this is in the English language.

We're lucky enough to have a parkland on the east side now called Murlawirrapurka park, so in case you're wondering what these names are you can make that little bit of a connection, now, with the squares around here and the parklands.

And it was great to hear the other day at a luncheon for NAIDOC week with Mr Malinauskas, the new premier, he actually mentioned that he's going to start to erect statues around Adelaide of some Kaurna elders, or you know, Aboriginal elders, which is wonderful to see. You know, we drive around Adelaide and we see someone holding a cricket bat and whatever, but the future generations, they don't really know that one. They're not interested in cricket anymore, they don't know who the great Sir Donald Bradman is, you know, so that's also terrible, we need to educate them on that one too. But it would be lovely, because I follow in the footsteps of my elders. And a lot of them are now ancestors. They are no longer with us.

So it's a privilege for me to be able to stand here before you and speak in my native tongue. I am only one of the first, crossing over to second generations off the mission, and that's, you know, people embrace us speaking our native language now, you know, instead of throwing us in jail, or banning us back to the mission with a permit and this and that. So it's a pleasure to continue in their footsteps.

In the words of my late Auntie, she used to say that we must all come together, we mustn't dwell on the past, but we mustn't forget the past either. She used to always say that it's very important that we move together in harmony. Now if you know my late Auntie she was a Kaurna elder here, I am not going to mention her name, but she was a Kaurna elder here in our community for many many years and she left a big influence. So it would be lovely one day to maybe see a statue of her. Or maybe Kadlitpina as well, that would be wonderful to have that in Adelaide here.

So once again, ladies and gentlemen, I'm not going to take too much more of your time, I think I have already gone over, I always do, but I would like to thank you very much for inviting me out here and I hope you feel blessed in your time here. If you're not from here I hope you feel the blessings and if you are from here, we all call this place home, so let's just all enjoy it together and embrace it. Thank you very much, ngaityalaya.

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JM: Thanks heaps Robert, it would be really cool to see some statues or memorials to some of the

amazing Indigenous artists that have worked here and lived here as well, I would love to see that day.

So I am Jen Mills and this is Sam Whiting, [checking microphones]

Today's event is really about how artists and unions can work together. I am just going to do a little bit of housekeeping and then Sam will tell you about Reset if that's all right. Basically the toilets are just in the hallway there and if they're full there's extra toilets in the Barbara Hanrahan building opposite, female, male and unisex/accessible.

You are welcome to keep your phones on but please put them on silent. There is a wifi password on the bar if you want to use it because I think the reception's not very good in here. But you are welcome also to tweet the events of the panels today and the discussion, we are using the #resetarts hashtag I believe.

And the events are being livestreamed at the moment, so both of the panels and this little introduction are being livestreamed. I won't be stopping the livestream in between the panels during the breaks, so be careful who you're badmouthing in the quiet corridors, you have been warned! The third part of today's discussion, the open discussion part, will not be livestreamed, so that will just be between us.

So I'll hand over to Sam, thank you.

Sam Whiting: Thanks Jen. So Jen and I are a part of Reset Arts and Culture which is a collective of academics, artists and activists who are putting on events, educating, awareness campaigns around how do we build better cultural policy in Australia. So this event came out of this sort of need between, Jen and I were talking about cultural labour and collectivising artists, how we believe it's really important, there's a lot of – so much organising potential there, there is like this untapped group of people that we could bring together and do an event like this around, so thank you all for coming, it's been amazing to see the interest from interstate and abroad as well as in South Australia. I know people have travelled here from the East coast which is amazing and we've got some great guests today joining us.

So we've got some little bits of literature, it wouldn't be a union event or a progressive event without some literature, reading material. These two bits of reading are free to take, this is our statement *For a Progressive Arts and Cultural Policy Agenda in Australia,* this is kind of our manifesto statement in a way, this is what we want to see as a bit of a conversation starter, so please take that, it's beautifully designed, and if you're up for a deeper read, one of our collaborators Professor Justin O'Connor has written this hefty piece kind of positioning arts and culture within this new idea of the foundational economy, which brings together social justice and labour rights, and workers' rights, with environmental sustainability causes, kind of marries those, but a lot of those discussions around the foundational economy have been missing arts and culture from the picture, so Justin is sort of putting arts and culture within that discussion.

So they are over there, Tully is taking care of those at the back. We also have a beautiful children's book illustrated by Mitzi McKenzie-King which is a beautiful children's book about unionism and how wonderful trade unionism is. I am not sure if Sam Wallman brought his book – he might have sold them all – oh you've got a couple? Sam Wallman's got an excellent graphic novel called Our Members Be Unlimited about the history of trade unionism and it's just a wonderful read.

So we've got some things to take for free and to buy.

And just a little more housekeeping, we've got some tea and coffee, we've got some bickies and fresh water at the back, is there anything else?

JM: I reckon that's about it.

SW: We can get cracking. Thank you so much for coming, we really really appreciate it, we've been working on this for quite a few months so we're really excited to have you. So yes stick around, and we will be having drinks after today, so stick around for that, and then we have some

tables booked at the West Oak once official proceedings wrap up.

Thanks againe for coming, please get to know each other in the breaks, have a chat, introduce yourselves, this is a chance to build solidarity, first and foremost. Thanks!

JM: Okay, we'll just hand over to our first amazing panelists, the panel's title is Artists as Workers, and we have some working artists to hear from now.

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Jessica Alice: All right. Hi everyone, thanks Jen and Sam for that intro and thanks Robert for that awesome Welcome to Country. My name's Jessica Alice, I'm the chair of the Arts Industry Council of South Australia, I'm a writer and a poet and the director of Writers SA and a member of the Reset collective as well.

It's great to have you all here for this first discussion today with these incredible writers and artists and organisers. And I too will acknowledge Kaurna country, that we're gathering on unceded land, this always was and always will be Kaurna country, and acknowledge that we're gathering in the spirit of art making, of community building, on lands where those practices have existed for millennia. So it's a real privilege to be here with you on this land.

Artists as workers. We are joined by three incredible artists and organisers. Natalie Harkin, incredible poet, Narungga woman. The Archival Poetics Manifesto in your incredible book *Archival Poetics* is one of the best pieces of literature in the last couple of years I would say, Nat. I encourage you all to read it. And an academic as well, please welcome Natalie Harkin.

Sam Wallman is a comics artist, Sam mentioned his great new book Our Members Be Unlimited, launched just last week here in Adelaide at the incredible Semaphore Workers Club, one of the genuinely greatest places in the country, Sam is an incredible writer and artist and also an organiser. Please welcome Sam Wallman.

And Joanne Sutton, an actor, performer, trade unionist and organiser at United Workers union, incredible to have your experience Jo, and your perspectives with us today. Please welcome Jo Sutton.

So each of these artists, these workers, have a creative practice as well as practices based in solidarity, so I want to ask each of them a little bit about their practice and then what we can learn from working together, from solidarity, and how we can practice that.

I'd love to start with you, Nat, can you tell us a little bit about your work, your own work in Archival Poetics, your work with Unbound Collective and the focus on labour, can you tell us a little bit about that?

Natalie Harkin: Thank you very much Jess for that very warm introduction, and especially Robert, I acknowledge you and all Kaurna people, our elders, ancestors, our emerging leaders, your welcomes always just bring all the ancestors with us. I was at an event with you last week and I've got a couple of books for you, so please don't leave the room without them as a gift to thank you for all the work you do in our community.

So I am a Narungga woman on my father's side of the family, we're Chesters; Chesters, Yates, Owens and Walkers are our family line. And I acknowledge this beautiful land, this beautiful Kaurna country that has – I was born in the Queen Elizabeth hospital in the western suburbs, I still live in the Western suburbs, in between moving around and living in different places but from Salisbury North to the Western suburbs, that's where I am, and this is the country I call home. It's not my ancestral country. My family, we have a three-mission history in my family, in my Aboriginal family, from Point Pearce and Raukkan which was known as Point McLeay and originally at Poonindie, where all of our families were rounded up and herded into this, behind the fences of the mission and the reserves that were like prisons for our family, we weren't allowed to leave, we weren't allowed to, as Robert said, practice language, culture. It was very experimental, creating little nuclear families and marrying Aboriginal men and women from different parts of the

country that were perhaps not meant to marry, or perhaps did not want to marry for love etcetera.

But our families always resisted, our families always were able to enact agency in their own ways, and our language and culture was continued, and despite the three mission histories in my family and there s been so much disruption, assimilation policies really really impacted on our family and as they did for all Aboriginal people. So it's a very typical story in South Australia, that forced movement. So my interest in archives and labour comes from doing some family research and family story research with state record archives, with the Children's Welfare Board, with Linkup, with so many different collections and archives, and that's where you really see the voices of our families and that agency being enacted, but also erasure and the suppression and repression of our voices and of our families, and how our families were contained, controlled, categorised, labelled etcetera through the archives.

Those labour stories that I was really drawn to come from a long line of, being a descendant from a long line of Aboriginal women domestic servants. And once I started getting these archives, on our family and sort of marrying what's on the colonial archive and colonial record with oral history and our blood memory and what we carry with us, which is often very different to what's written on the archive about us, it became very important for me to put the spotlight very firmly back on the state and those policies that are still not known in our wider community. I've always said our Aboriginal families can navigate policy better than anyone in this country because when you're born under the Act you're born under so much control and surveillance and you navigate that in particular ways in order to survive.

So these labour stories are so important, and it's a hidden history in our community. It's indentured labour, stolen women and men working as servants, as slaves, not always as slaves – when I opened the exhibition Apron Sorrow Sovereign Tea at Vitalstatistix last year for Tarnanthi, for the Tarnanthi festival, one of my aunties rocked up, she said 'you're not going to tell everyone I was a slave are you?' and I said no, Aunty Dolly, I'm not going to tell everyone you were a slave, but that is the story of many women who were slaves. So my Nanna, my great grandmother, all of their aunties, all of my Nanna's sisters, and there was that forced movement between placements. Between domestic service placements with private families, on farms, in Adelaide establishment homes. My great grandmother went back to the mission pregnant twice from being in Adelaide establishment homes and we know who they are. Right? And these are big names who are revered up and down North Terrace. In this cultural precinct that Robert was talking about. All right? So. But of course they're not owned, they're not, our families are not owned or acknowledged in that way.

So for me, drowning in these archives of this domestic labour, of which it was a formal part of assimilation policy, so every Aboriginal person I know has a domestic service story, an indentured labour story. That's not widely known or acknowledged in the wider narrative of our labour movement, of our labour history, in the union movement, and just as part of the labour story, the women's story of this country, of this state.

So the only way for me to really transform out of those archives was to write poetry. To create work. To honour those women and all the women in my family and the women in our community who carry these stories, these embodied stories, intimately, and to create work in solidarity with other women. So it's a very collaborative way of being an artist or being a poet, I work with the incredible Unbound Collective who are my sisters, my colleagues, my friends, at Flinders University. We've grown up in the university higher education space together, we've supported each other through being a collective, through our own solidarity, and creating work together as artists, as performers, as poets, as writers, and we got each other through our PhDs, we are in positions now where we feel like we have come into our own in the higher education sector, and we feel like we can be sovereign together through the arts. And for us, the arts space is the only place where we can really feel sovereign as Aboriginal women, and do this kind of work where we can honour those hidden stories and hidden histories. And labour stories is just one of so many. So I don't know if that's answered, or you want anything else?

JA: [laughs] What else you got, Nat? Beautiful. Thank you. I'm going to ask you a little bit more about working as a collective with Unbound in a moment. On that notion of artist collectives, Sam you're a member of the Workers Art Collective. Can you tell us a little bit about how you all found each other, how you developed your artistic practices around these grassroots movements?

Sam Wallman: Yeah, thank you for the beautiful generosity of your words and the acknowledgement of country, I am from Wurundjeri country myself. I want to pay my respects to the Kaurna people on unceded land here and I'm very happy to be visiting and appreciate all that.

With the Workers Art Collective, we started that maybe five years ago because we recognised that there were maybe a dozen – including Holly [Moly], comrade! – we were all working in a similar space, we were all union members and rank and file activists, most of us, and doing work that clicks in to support delegates and organisers in their efforts on sites and we all just hung out and worked together. Like, we work in a shared art studio in Trades Hall, the oldest union building on the planet which is very cool. We are in this old turret for seven or eight years which is very special. We're very grateful to be in there but we're also friends with Mary Leunig and Geoff Hogg and John Hughes and the artists who in the '80s were funded through the Art in Working Life program, we have this connection with them that we think is really special, but they got paid a salary to work there, and like, we're really grateful to have the space, and we love being close to that nerve centre there, but we pay rent to live there so we're kind of like, standing on these shoulders but also like, in a very different time.

So we all sort of thought the group would be a nice way to formalise our solidarity a little bit because we already had each other's backs and if we couldn't do a project we would refer someone else whose style might suit whatever that project was, and it was also just a way to not compete with each other, because you know, there's only so many things going on that people with our politics might be tapped on the shoulder to work on. So we just intentionally were like, no scarcity mentality here, we'll have each other's backs and we'll share equipment and material and skills and yeah, Holly often, like the other day put in the group chat, 'which colour palette is better?' So you're talking about material things, how much should I quote for this job, but then also just like goofier stuff as well cause we want to have an organic connection to support each other's practices basically.

JA: Cool. That's interesting that you mention the competition thing and not wanting to be in competition with each other. Jo, when you were, you went to art school, to VCA? How did you find – how did you come to unionism, as an organiser now, but how did you find it through that process, going through art school and everything?

JS: Thank you, and again thank you so much for the opportunity to be here and the wonderful Welcome to Country and I too would like to acknowledge that we are on unceded Kaurna land and it always was, always will be Aboriginal land.

Yeah, it's interesting. So first of all I think I'll go backwards, like how I came to unionism. I was one of those, my grandfather, a wonderful Glaswegian named Alex McKechnie**,** was the secretary of a union, of the Waterside Workers Union, and so I was lucky enough to be engaged in union and political discussions from you know, as young as I could talk or converse and so we had this thing at the kitchen table after dinner because my Mum and Dad both worked, we're from a really strong working class low socio-economic family, so Nan and Pa used to look after us. And so Pa would come home and he would be talking about what's happening with his union and I, instead of going off and watching television or going and reading a book or going and doing something else, I would sit at the table. And just initially digest the conversations and listen to what was happening on the waterfront at that point. And the latter part of that was obviously dealing with containerisation which was a big shake-up to the industry, but it was very much that you could start to then, you know, posit questions and offer an opinion, but you also had to back your opinion in as well, no matter how young you were. So it was a very lively and healthy discussion.

So union for me was like breathing. I started working, fifteen or sixteen at a pub, while I was at high school, because I wanted a car, and I was very adamant that I was going to buy that myself because my parents didn't have enough money to do that, and first day on the job, joined the union. But I don't think that there was necessarily a consciousness around what that could open up for me. That was just what my family did, and it was the right thing to do.

Fast forward, I was actually lucky enough to work with the then LHMU for a year in like a scholarship or mentor-based union program, and I was studying at the same time at the Elder School of Music, I was studying opera, and this leads into I guess my experience at drama school as well.

It's very odd going through three, because it's an audition based program and you're generally with the same group of people from when you start to when you finish, so you collaborate with each other on that journey and you're in productions with each other and you're each other's comrades for lack of a better expression, but there is a deep-seated competition that is placed between you and I'm sorry to say it, particularly women. There's not a lot of roles for women, certainly when I was coming up through drama school it was very, you know, you'd find your niche, you were either – and I'm obviously speaking quite generally, but you were the best friend, or you were the love interest, or you were the weird creepy auntie, or you were the Lady Macbeth, or you were the Juliet, you know? And there wasn't really a scope of who could play that which I always found to be quite interesting because we were pretending anyway. [laughs] Like, I'm not Lady Macbeth, right?

But I found there was a real disconnect between the camaraderie that we had in a training institution, given that we were with the same, I mean we started at VCA, when I started we started with 31, we had, there's an audition culture and a Conservatorium culture with VCA which I don't think exists now, but I am happy to stand corrected, where you would audition, so I think it was 1800 people auditioned the year I got in, and 31 got into first year. But you only auditioned for first year. So then you had to be assessed at the end of second year to see if you got through. And so in third year you'd expect we'd all just have this like sigh of, 'Oh gosh, we got there,' you know? But then it was, 'Oh, now let's prep you for film and television, and what you're going to have to look like, or sound like. And we'll tell you what you'll be cast as.'

And I don't hold a lot of animosity for the lecturers and the teachers, I think that that was just a model that they had been, that they had worked in as well and they were really trying to do the best for us, in terms of trying to gain employment, but the culture itself was fractured, because you were living and working and building performance and community with these excellent people from all around the country that had their own special skills, only to survive those two rigorous audition processes to get to the safety of third year, only then to be competing against each other for roles. And I always found that to be a bit odd, really.

So I think for me the idea of solidarity just became an inherent way of behaving, because it was, 'the standard you walk past is the standard you accept,' right? So there are things that you can't change, in the context of when I was trying to get work as an actor, but where I really moved into was a lot of independent theatre, a lot of queer theatre, finding community around retelling our stories and really trying to, in the very small corner of the world that we occupied, trying to shift the notion of the patriarchy being the ultimate storytelling vehicle, like why do we have to continue to tell these stories in the way they were always told? We, as artists, as unionists, as people, evolve. And there can be different perceptions about who's the villain, who's the hero, why are we seeing it through that lens. And the solidarity and community that we built through those independent spaces really helped to shift my idea of what art could be, but also what a community could be.

The unfortunate part about that, which I'm sure we will get to in a minute, is that we didn't get paid very much to do that work. Like a lot of that work was about us really trying to tell a story and shift a narrative within the mainstream theatrical space, but there was not a lot of financial value placed on that work. There was a lot of, 'Oh, we think that's fantastic' and 'Oh my gosh, I can't believe you came up with that and how brilliant are you all' and blah blah blah blah blah, but no-one wanted to pay us for it. And I think that – which I am sure will be discussed later – that was

really the crux for me as to why organising, why being active, why being collective, why pushing and asking for more. You don't get if you don't ask. And there are spaces that I believe artists need to feel in a way that is claiming more space to say this is our work, this is art as product but I am the product, and also the practitioner, so I need the financial reimbursement and recognition for holding both of those spaces when creating art. So that's my view.

JA: Hell yeah. Yeah, okay, so let's talk about the precarity of arts work. We know that a lot of arts work is very low paid, we know that it's often, like, you might be contracted and then you may not be earning superannuation, you may not have leave entitlements that come with that, there might be fairly variable rates of pay for what you're getting. What are some of the ways, from what you've learned from working in collectives, from organising, how can we start to, like what are some of the things that we can do? How can we start building that solidarity so that we can work together to change some of these practices? What can we take from the lessons from unions and other workers working together, how can we start to change some of those things? What are some of the things that you're seeing that are changing, that we can take some lessons from?

SW: Well, if anyone's not in the MEAA, you should join the union. Obviously it's different, typically workers through their unions have made the biggest gains when they've been able to be less atomised, like they've worked in the one workplace which obviously artists don't. You've been able to historically go on strike which is harder for us. Possible, like you've seen that with the Biennale and Palestinian solidarity stuff so it's still an option, but there are some structural hurdles for artists to organise, but it's definitely still worth it and even just – there's the Rate Tracker website that the MEAA run, where you can just talk about how much you get paid, and if you pitch to an outlet or they propose that you make something, you can just make it a matter of course to go on and see how much other people got paid. Which is really helpful because obviously not everyone's going to get paid the same, which is another barrier to organising as an artist, because you might, like, especially as a cartoonist, or an illustrator or whatever, there are fundamental differences between how long a piece might take or how long you've been at it, what tier you might be at, things that translate in a normal workplace but it's a bit glitchy to work out as an artist.

It's almost like we need two pay grades, like we've talked about back in the early 2010s that #paythewriters movement, people were like, we've got the rate card, which is the other most important thing that MEAA offers in my situation, I can always look at that rate card, but it is quite aspirational for some outlets, so that could be like the Murdoch rate card or something, but I do think we have to be a little bit more dynamic in our responses to working for more grassroots projects which is a little pet peeve of mine. Like definitely pay the writers, pay the artists, but a lot of people don't get paid for their work as well, like delegates, shop stewards, some of the most important parts of the labour movement don't get paid anything extra for their contribution to political work, so I do think we have to be a little bit less knee-jerk about like 'Pay me, no matter what I'm doing,' because it's also like, art should exist outside of markets, even though we have to pay the bills you know. Especially if you're doing political work.

My metric is kind of like, if someone approaches me and asks me to do art and they're getting paid, well I should probably be getting paid if you're asking me and you're getting paid. But I think a lot of the time, people will just not ask an artist to do something for free, even if it's for an activist project, because they're rightly trying to be respectful about work. But I don't think that benefits the political ecosystem really.

But anyway, this is not really the space to be talking about not getting paid! MEAA's rate card is awesome, it helped me value my own work more, and even if an outlet can't pay the rate that the card suggests I always tell them, and just be like 'This is how much you should value me, and how nice I'm being by doing it for 2/3 of the rate' or whatever. And that rate tracker as well is also really good. And it's quite cheap to be a member of the MEAA, sorry I'm getting full Danoz here, I'll stop. [laughs]

And if you don't make much money from your work as well, it's really cheap. Couple of

bucks a week or something.

JS: I think one of the things that I would say is useful, to speak on that idea of the arts industry as atoms, or we're not, the traditional way to collectivise, say, in what we would call a traditional workplace, although the traditional workplace hasn't existed for a very long time although we hold that in our minds as something that still does, is look where the arts, or areas of the arts, are already being organised.

One of the things that was always really apparent to me was sometimes a forced divide that would be put between what you would call the front of house and back of house, or the talent and the support, right? I find that really offensive, because people are talented no matter what it is they do within the arts sector, and any contribution is valid. But if there is, for example, stage managers, mechs, lighting designers, a lot of people that actually, I'm just thinking theatre because that's my jam, but there is already a really strong collective within that space, and possibly an EBA that's in place, or things like that. And those organising practices have already happened. And I think for artists it's actually like breaking down some of those barriers and going, we're actually all, if you think about putting on a play as an example, or a performance as an example, it is a collaborative project. You have to actually have everybody doing their job and serving their function in order for that project to be successful. So I don't see that being any different when you're trying to organise within that workplace or, say, that theatre company, as an example.

And then similarly, I think, within independent theatre, I think there is – not necessarily directly for pay, but in terms of speaking to the point that was placed earlier around creating a healthy arts culture, creating a positive culture within the arts – I think that there's things like, you know, a code of conduct. And I know that there was some work done years ago certainly in the Melbourne independent scene around organising around conditions, organising around what you will and won't accept. Sometimes rehearsal rooms can be incredibly – they can be a dictatorship in a lot of ways. And sometimes that's useful in terms of getting the work done, but I think that there are certain behavioural expectations that we should start organising around and expecting. Because that goes down ultimately to people feeling safe, and making sure that they can then be in a safe environment to create work, but that they are then respected as the worker, fundamentally.

Because I think sometimes my experience has been as an artist, you've got to be – I mean, people here would know it, 'You've got to be broken down to be built back up again,' and you know, like, 'Live your trauma,' and all this kind of stuff. And it's like, no. You don't need to do that. And anybody that says you do is actually just trying – I don't know why that would be exciting for people or what in their mind thinks that's a good thing, but ultimately if you're pretending to be someone else, or you're pulling out a performance, there is a skill set to that. There is a collaborative element to that where you draw inspiration from other people in the moment. And I think that there's a lot of behaviour within the arts that we need to stamp out and dismiss that that makes you a better artist or creates a better performance. There is struggle, and there is work, to open up an idea or a narrative or a story, but that's not to the detriment of the artist. And we shouldn't deliberately force people to go through that struggle in order to say that they can or can't create art.

JA: I'm just going to flag that we can take questions from the audience soon, so think on that. I was going to say in a specific amount of time, and then I realised I wasn't sure what that was. So, soon.

Even though this isn't the environment to talk about not getting paid, I think what you were getting at though Sam was about that sort of mutual – like, it's a reciprocity thing in artists' communities, and how we look after each other, and generosity and care and all those kinds of things. Which I think is like the foundation for building solidarity, is to be looking out for each other and having each other's backs and making sure that we're safe together and all of that sort of stuff. Nat, I wondered if you could tell us a bit about how you navigate that, in the university environment as well as in artist collectives, because that can be a fraught space as well.

NH: Yes it definitely can, and just to echo Jo, the individualism of courses and students, I've been in higher education since 1996, got my first job with Wirtlu Yarlu**,** the Aboriginal Programs unit at Adelaide Uni, then I worked at the David Unaipon College at UniSA, then went up to Yungkurrinthi at Flinders University, with my dream team, and the Yungkurrinthi Indigenous education space there. So it's been a long time of working in higher education. I joined the Yungkurrinthi team in 2014. And it is a very – I've always worked in Indigenous spaces, so I've never not worked in an Aboriginal context, I guess. And that's been really incredibly fortunate, I feel very, very fortunate, because it is our safety net within very individualistic, patriarchal cultural institutions that have perpetuated quite a lot of, I guess violence in relation to representation of Aboriginal people, and who gets to speak on behalf of whom.

And this is still an issue now around whose stories, who's telling whose stories, and this is a very contemporary, particularly in the last – well, it's always been an issue and contested within our communities, but the speaking position. It's changing slowly. Having more Aboriginal people in academia is shifting the narrative. We still find quite a lot of confrontation, though, like a resistance. And I guess the collectivity is what has kept us really strong and sane. And we're in it for the long game, we're not going anywhere.

But we've had quite a lot of hurdles with the institutions. So coming together as a collective, always working in Indigenous spaces, like I said I feel very fortunate. But in terms of the PhD, teaching, it's very individualistic, and yes, competitive. The grants process is really obscene. You know, Tully [Barnett] is in the room. Tully, you know, we're on the Assemblage Centre for Creative Arts together, we know what it means. Tully's an ARC researcher, I'm an ARC researcher through a DECRA, and as early career researchers, the grant processes are just terrible. They can be really demoralising and soul-destroying. To work collectively around grants is just so much better.

I work collectively with the Unbound Collective, we were all doing our PhDs together, sitting in little offices, in little boxes side by side, all doing creative research methodologies, and then it was Ali [Gumilya Baker]'s brainchild, let's just do our work together, do an exhibition, we're all doing creative research methodologies, pull together. We formed the Unbound Collective, and for us, it was just survival. It wasn't really about putting work out there for anybody else but us and our families. And there was something quite magical about coming together as a collective. It has literally saved us in the academy from all sorts of things which I don't necessarily need to go into.

But yeah, I think it's the individualism which can be really soul-destroying, and that competitive nature of grants, and just getting through. I mean we are activists every day in the space, just by stepping through that institution. Flinders is better than others, let me tell you. But it has had its ebbs and waves of you know, of trauma for all staff, particularly in the humanities.

I don't know if there's anything else?

JA: No, that's amazing.

What are some of the practicalities of forming a collective? Like, what are some of the ways that in practice, how is that different from you having your own, how formalised is it?

NH: I guess that we respond a lot to community. We respond to our communities, we're very place based in how we respond to country and the Traditional Owners that always inform us and our work. We have a lot of trust with each other, there's a lot of love. We talk about love a lot, with our students, with each other, in academic programs, in our research. And people get really confronted by that. There's not a lot of love that's really spoken about, but I think there's a lot of love and solidarity in unionism.

I mean, you know, 'comrade.' That's a love. That's a deep love that we have for each other as workers and as unionists. And in our collective we talk about that a lot with each other, with students. And it's not always easy or smooth sailing, but we've got enough respect for each other to just move through that. And I think, I guess we're pretty much all on the same page, in a lot of ways, and we try to bring each other into the space, so you know, I'm here talking about the Unbound Collective, but Ali, Simone [Ulalka Tur] and Faye [Rosas Blanch] are with me a hundred

per cent, always.

We all have our own practice as well, and that's important, and I love that. I love being a poet and being part of the Indigenous Writers Group, which Jess, you've been an incredible ally and supporter of the success of that group, and the ebbs and flows that that group has gone through, we're in a really good place now, thanks to the support of Writers SA.

I guess that we're good at knowing who our allies are, I think. And we're good at steering clear of people who piss us off, or who we go, actually you're just wanting a piece, you're wanting to pick our brains, you're wanting a piece of us. A lot of Aboriginal people, I think we're very generous with the knowledge and what we share with people. And there's not a lot of reciprocity that comes back. There's a lot of taking. And so we know who we can work with. We know that Vitalstatistix is a place to go to if we want to work collaboratively with artists, in a really amazing institution that has social justice and Indigenous sovereignty at its heart. So, yeah. We know who we can work with.

JA: So what are some of the things that we can do in order to, in our advocacy, in our work, how can we shift things so that artistic labour, creative work, is properly valued as work, and what are some of the things that you would like to see? Like, what are some of the initiatives that you're into, what are some of the strategies that we can use to start to shift that into a place where creative work is valued properly as work?

SW: I think just being a part of having a less extractive community, and just celebrating each other and yeah, having each other's backs in every way will trickle out into this. Like, I remember, I was just thinking before, when the pandemic started and I was shit-scared because Iit's the first time I haven't had another job, the last few years, just illustrating. And I was like, 'Oh, surely this is the first line of the budget that's going to get struck.' But so many unions were like, 'oi, are you all right? Like, what's going on, we'll get you to do something for us.' Which I thought was charity that would dry up, but after a while I was like, oh actually there is, in crises, a lot of stuff to communicate. I felt like that was just a reserve of me trying to be supportive of other projects and that was like coming back to me, and that was quite moving, honestly.

And I think, just, yeah acting in that spirit of good faith with people leads it to come back to you. Even I think a lot of unions recognise that I do, maybe about a third of the work I do is not paid, someone, a union member will message me from the worksite and be like, this thing's going on, and then often I will just do like a quick drawing or whatever. But I feel like a few unions have given me a nod and a wink, and been like, add a little bit extra to your invoice because we know how you operate. Which is really nice. And it's just like an implicit, organic thing.

I don't know, that's not very concrete politics, I wish I had a more structured way. But I think just acting in good faith, and having each other's backs, it's going to come back to you really.

JS: I'm just going to put my organiser hat on for a second. We use a thing in organising which is called – the first thing to point out is that we've got a very, very long list within the arts community, given the ongoing undervaluing of art as work. We've got stuff we've got to sort out. And so I'm not in any way trying to be deflating, other than we have to then come up with, there has got to be a plan, right? So there is a plan to win something. And I think the biggest thing initially is within certain arts communities – because it will be different, depending on what each practice needs – but actually coming up with, like, we use a framework called 'Widely felt, deeply felt, winnable' right, which is this idea of going, what is this thing that connects us horizontally, like connects the most of us? Of those things that connect us broadly, what hits you in your gut. What's the thing that you kind of go, if we don't change this, we can't keep moving forward? And what's the capacity to win with that. Right?

And obviously that then changes the more that you take action and win and organise, but I think the key element for artists to overcome this atomisation is to find out what fundamentally connects us as a culture, and what as art as work, as an 'industry' although I don't like that word for

art but it is, as an industry, what is the key thing that we need to win first?

I think the general push is respect for the work. And as much as I absolutely agree with Sam that we need to move out of a space where everything is transactional with art, because that can be a problem as well, putting an inherent financial value on something that doesn't necessarily have an inherent financial value, because it's more. But things like, and this is only my anecdotal experience, 'Oh, come and sing for us at this birthday, because you can sing, and it will be really good exposure for you.' Like, it's a 70th birthday in Belair, I don't know who's going to, you know, not to take that away from the experience, but I don't know who's there to kind of give me a gig after that.

I'm being facetious, but there is that expectation in art and in art practice that me giving you something of me as the artist is good for me, to do it unpaid. Because you're giving me a chance to make my art. And I would fundamentally disagree with that. I may choose to do that, as the artist, but I think we need to break down that expectation that it's in my best interests that you give me an opportunity to do something for free.

So I think that from a practical sense there are things within communities, so looking say at the independent theatre space, because there, as much as yes, join your union, be a member of your union, I could not stress that enough, but there might be a very – it's a non-traditional organising space, because you could be in different rehearsal rooms, it might not be as regimented as if you're in a theatre company, but have a conversation. If you're coming as the cast of something, before you even go into that rehearsal room, caucus. Find out what you're doing to come into that room. What's the expectation? We're going in with a united code of conduct, this is what we expect, this is what we want, this is what you will not do, this is what we will not accept. And have a collective move into that room. So then when that rehearsal room starts to really open up, and you start to build that piece, you have collectively come up, as union members in that space, you have collectively come up with what you will or won't accept. Then you have the capacity, and obviously in an independent theatre space you're getting a profit share, you're getting a share of the profit that that work may or may not make, your ability to take action is actually really exciting and open. Because there's always going to be more of you in the cast.

So that would be my first very practical thing. What you're doing collectively, if you're working collectively, is get together as that group of artists and performers and have a real clear idea what you will and won't accept within that performance space for however long you're doing it for.

JA: Incredible.

Pop your hand up if you've got a question, we've got a – yes?

I'll repeat the question on the mic.

So the question was when there might be an award rate but a whole lot of the industry isn't getting it, and then there's market rates that might be different from that, how do you navigate that?

SW: I have no answers, I mean even within – most of the work I do is for trade unions, and they often ask, 'Do you have a rate card?' and I don't have a rate card because if I'm doing something for RAFFWU, like, an unregistered, experimental, radical union that I really believe in, I'm going to charge a very different fee to what I would charge a cashed-up union like the ETU, or UWU or something like that. So I actually just don't even know how we would go about that. Apart from, like, just having transparency and talking to your fellow members.

And that I think is why the Rate Tracker is a good initiative, because at least you go in equipped with the knowledge of where other people are at. And that probably does lift the floor a bit. But I think we have to be a little bit experimental, which is sort of what I've been thinking lately. A lot of us can get a bit doctrinaire, and like, you know, the oldschool unions, and this is how you organise, and you go here and here. But you [Jo] were describing basically a different model of unionism, like they may or may not be members of the union but they're basically building an in-house one. With that spirit, but without a roadmap. And I think we just have to get better at doing

that. Because the coolest shit happening, like Amazon Labor Union in the states, like no-one thought that was going to work. That was, like, outside of the normal framework of trade unions. RAFFWU: 'not a real union,' but kicking goals every other week. I just think we have to be a bit more dynamic and not think that there's a playbook. Because if there is a playbook, then the bosses and the elites know it as well as us, so they know how to stop us. So it's never been static, and if we get static, then we're not going to get paid more, or democratise these projects.

JS: Yeah, I think that idea of – there's no road map. And I think that one of those things just to hearken on to that idea of unionism, you know, a union is its members, right? I don't think there's – having been an organiser for the length of time that I have, all of the brilliant, innovative ideas that come to holding the boss to account come from the people working at the coalface. And it's the organiser and the leaders that help to facilitate that and work that to be a genuine action that can make change.

So I think, just speaking like I was saying before, like the idea of coming up with your sort of in-house union, say if it was an independent theatre space, then you can actually go, like if you're members of MEAA which I would suggest you would be in the theatre space, you go back to MEAA and say 'Hey we tried this,' you know what I mean? It informs both ways. Be union first, absolutely, because that gives you the industrial protection that you need. But your union, all unions, need the innovative and exciting and imaginative actions of their members. And that's what builds union in solidarity. So I think, you know, that's when you identify who union leaders are, who then could go out and take that to other worksites.

So I think, yeah, it's about coming up with those ideas and working closely with your union and your union organisers to come up with a road map where we haven't won in that space before, to try and do something that allows us to win.

SW: And then make some art to communicate it.

JS: And yes, then have an artistic narrative to say how you did it!

JA: So for the people on the stream, the question was, what does the panel think about things like a basic income for artists?

JS: I mean I'm never going to say no to subsidised art, right? I think art is inherently human, it's what connects us, in so many ways I think it's what talking about that idea of love before, like the idea of you can feel so connected to someone through song or through speech or through dance or through, it's what we live life for. I mean that's why we're all in the room. So the idea of actually having a community and a country where art is something that we fund as a collective, because we would be in a very sorry state if we didn't have art and the evolution of art to continue to tell our stories as we evolve as this very unique and sometimes frustrating country. Right? Like, we need to constantly keep each other accountable and hold each other accountable and art really is one of the only universal things that allows so many different types of people and community to access and understand, and to come on a journey. To move forward. I mean they're very lofty ideals but I believe in them fundamentally and I think if there are places where we're going to spend money, and what we're going to put our tax dollars to, art should be a significant part of what we fund. Because it's going to be a very boring life if we don't have it.

SW: I think a UBI for artists is more appealing than a broader UBI which I am not super supportive of, because I think it's just like begging for more rations rather than structurally changing power dynamics or our relationship to the means of production or whatever. But I do think, yeah, it would solve a lot of problems.

Oh, these mics hate me. [laughs] I guess that means stop talking.

Audience member: Something I've been thinking about lately is we know that young people are easily exploited because they don't know the, are likely less familiar with the kind of framework they're entering, right? And that kind of exposure stuff is – you accept that a few times before you realise that it's going nowhere. And I'm wondering what any of you are doing, or thoughts you have about how we build this kind of more solidified, intergenerational movement? I think Sam, you were talking about working with artists who are older than you, and I think we really need to stop inventing the wheel each generation.

JS: I'm happy for someone else to answer. I think the idea was, how do we work intergenerationally, to not live the mistakes of the past but also to learn the lessons of the past and where they have worked we move forward with them.

Young people being exploited particularly, I look to some more sort of industrial lessons that we may have learned through what we would call more traditional industries. The apprenticeship system is one that I think there has been some great work done in to start to break down that culture. Like I remember my dad telling me, he was a chippy, a carpenter/cabinet maker, and went through the four year apprenticeship, and the idea is that the fourth year treats the first year like crap because the first year was treated like crap by their fourth year, and that's just kind of what happens, right? You know, the jokes about 'go and find the elbow grease' and just that gives them, they miss two hours of work because there've just been pranks and you know, you're earning your stripes kind of stuff. So I think that there is an onus on us to just draw a line in the sand really, and just start saying no. And actually start standing up for our younger comrades.

And I think that goes back to the point I was making around drama school, you know. I think there was some really great work done at VCA most recently where there was a staged walkout around some bad behaviour that had been exhibited, and the students actually came together. So that's ten years, twelve years after I was there. And I was like, okay, so twelve years later, there's a whole group of particularly women and men as allies going, 'Nup, we're walking out.'

So I think it's actions like that, but it's also publicising those. To go, just because we accepted it fifteen, twenty years ago, does not mean it needs to be accepted now. But also, the people who were at the receiving end of that really bad behaviour don't see it as an opportunity to get their own. To do it to someone else because it was done to them. I think that's where you take responsibility and go, that was done to me, that felt like absolute rubbish, the damage that that has done is quite significant, I'm going to then be the advocate for the next generation to go, it stops with me.

In an organising perspective I think that that's just again, having very open conversations about what is expected or accepted behaviour, versus what's not. But I think it's a question of going, just because it happened fifteen years ago, we don't accept it now. Because we have to acknowledge that we've moved on and we need to be a more inclusive sector around that.

NH: I'm not really sure how I can contribute. It's interesting. I think about an inclusive sector and I still see it as not very inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers. Or the sector... you know. Aboriginal arts is so revered and so big and such a, y'know, it brings in so much to the Australian economy, and I think about that, like Gem you were just talking about the intergenerational lessons, and I'm just not sure.

I think about our work here on the ground and our arts, often Aboriginal art, the artists I know and work with across the kind of multiple sectors across the arts, are responding to use this as a platform of great responsibility to create transformative change for our communities. And not just our own communities but the broader community in general. And the intergenerational nature of that is always listening to the words and the actions and the experiences of our elders, who have experienced a very different life and different traumas. We are an incredibly – we recognise that we are privileged compared to what our parents and grandparents lived and worked through. So I might be taking that too literally around intergenerational, kind of, lessons, etcetera, but I know in our art practice we take it with, we feel so responsible for having a different life, for our communities and our families who are in abject poverty, and there's still so much oppression. Right

across, not just for Aboriginal people of course, but as first sovereign people of this country, there's still so much reckoning to do.

And I think of the union movement, you know, the really important work – sorry his name's just gone out of my head – with the Uluru Statement from the Heart, you know, he spoke at May Day rally a couple of years ago – yes, yes of course, Thomas Mayor. So a really amazing advocate and leader for that Statement. And of course the Uluru Statement from the Heart is very contested still, there's a lot of work to be done in that space, we feel incredibly hopeful with this change of government. And Simone's just come back from Garma, and listening to the Prime Minister speaking about that statement, and we do feel a different sense of hope now, than what we have. As I am sure everybody in the room can agree on.

But yeah, I think there's still so much work to do in the movement, in the labour movement around this idea of inclusivity. Because I go to May Day rallies, and I go to events in the union movement, even the Labour History Society, there's this erasure of Aboriginal labour. Of Aboriginal voices. Of Aboriginal perspectives and representation of these stories in the labour movement.

And that's I think what really impelled me to do this labour history for women's stories in this state, in South Australia, particularly around, in response to the Senate inquiry, it was a 2006 Senate inquiry into stolen wages. And South Australia refused – well, the South Australian government, only three submissions went to that Senate inquiry, and the SouthAustralian government of the time said, 'We don't have a problem here.'

We know. We know we have a problem here, because that's our families's stories. The archives tell us that we have a problem here. The United Aborigines Mission has locked down its archives because we have a problem here. So we can no longer access some archives, we now have to get our archives vetted through the Attorney General's department, so the only set of archives in South Australia are the Aboriginal records that have to go through legal and professional privilege before they can be released to us. The only set of archives, right? And that is so that we can get an understanding of our labour stories. And not just for us, but for the wider community.

But I think, you know, there's so little research done in this space, so I'm grappling to see what's out there. And especially in the union movement. I love the union movement, you know, I also grew up with, you know, had this bright red phone and the phone was going hot because my Dad was a unionist working at Birkenhead. It's just, I still feel there's an absence of voice, and so that intergenerational, we go to our elders, we go to what they experienced, and we feel this sense of responsibility to do what we can as individuals and also collectively within our communities, within our artists collectives and as Aboriginal artists, but I think there's a lot of work to be done in that space around Indigenous representation.

SW: Could I say something? Yeah, I completely agree, we live in a place with like tens of thousands of years of history of people not being alienated from their labour, you'd think we'd talk about that more and try and learn from that era. And the postcolonial as well. I think that the oral tradition stuff that is, I don't want to overstate the point, but that the Indigenous and the union movement have in common, does infer an intergenerational respect that is quite unique in this sort of society. And I know that there is just like an inherent respect for older people in the union movement for so many different reasons. And I think it's just being willing to go, like, hat in hand and be like, I don't want to be like, 'ah, come on, respect your older people' too much, but for real, you just go and listen. And even as I get older myself, I think it goes both ways. I am trying to listen to my younger comrades as well, and not just be like, I've got all the knowledge, or only the really older people have it. We all have stuff to bring to the table. And yeah, I think just listening to each other, and making space for each other's insights. Even if they're a fifteen-year-old. Work is different now for young people to when I was young.

JA: We're almost out of time, but I did just want to really quickly ask, because it's a really good example of that, of respecting your elders, but Nat when we did the Context writers festival last

year, I think it was last year, which Dominic Guerrera curated, Unbound did this honouring event around the work of Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson, and that was such an incredible event, hearing from the Professor, and hearing from the members of Unbound reflecting on her work and her legacy and her impact on all of you. Could you just tell us a little bit about that? Because that feels to me like a really straight-up way of doing that kind of respect.

NH: Well, when you have someone like Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson in the house, you know, you just have to hand over the microphone, really. You can't – all we could do was honour her. And it was, I guess, curated as a panel where we had this conversation, but honestly, we were just like, 'We love you, and we thank you, and we've grown up with you in academia, and you wrote this incredible book over twenty years ago called *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*.' And that has been so influential for so many scholars, not just Aboriginal but also within, well, everyone really, who reads it, as far as in my circle anyway, I know I probably live in a bubble. But she was phenomenal. And it is that practice of honouring. I think that's just part of what we do. We always honour what has gone before us.

And just to go back to my earlier comment about sometimes there's an erasure or silence in the union movement around Indigenous representation and voices, I have to make the point too that it was the union movement who stood in solidarity, particularly in the 1930s and 40s, and through the Communist movement, etcetera, the Communist Party and socialist parties and all those incredible alliances for Indigenous rights, not just to wages, but also to land, and to be recognised as human beings and as citizens. So the Gurindji walk-offs, and so many strikes and petitions, from the first point of colonial contact, really. Some unions, not all. There's a lot of racism in the union movement as well. But some unions, and some unionists and key individuals stood very strong and proud. So I do want to acknowledge that. And say that again, acknowledging and honouring that.

And yeah we do, we honour, and we acknowledge, and we love, you know? That's what connects us as human beings.

SW: We all knew the critique was coming from inside the camp. [laughs]

JA: Incredible. We are out of time, can you join me in thanking Natalie Harkin, Sam Wallman and Joanne Sutton.

We're going to have a little break I think, so we can, if you've got any other questions, feel free to come up to the panellists in the break, and I might hand it over to Sam to tell us what's happening next, or Jen?

SW: If anyone wants to buy a book, I'm going to set up. I've just got my publisher in my head, she's like, be a better capitalist!

Sam Whiting: Grab some tea and coffee, if anyone wants an espresso there's quite a few coffee shops just around the corner. Fifteen minute break, and then we've got a great panel with some more unionists and more artists about how we organise.

-- 1:21:00 --

Jen Mills: Okay, welcome back. It's really nice to see everyone chatting and networking and getting fired up out there, it's what this event is all about. So thanks everyone for coming back and listening to our amazing new panellists.

This panel is called 'How we Organise,' and we have three incredible artists/organisers with us today. I'm just going to introduce myself first. My name's Jen Mills and I'm the author of five books, most recently *The Airways*. As a full-time writer I freelance as also a critic, essayist, editor and mentor, and I'm on the National Freelance Committee at my union, MEAA, where we've been making some progress organising freelance writers. I'm currently Artist in Residence at

Vitalstatistix, where I am in a salaried position two days a week which is enabling me to do this kind of organising work. And I'm also a member of the Reset Arts and Culture collective here on Kaurna Yerta.

So I'm going to start from the far end, we have here Kimberley Wheeler who is a very accomplished and award-winning musician, working as a singer-songwriter, gigging muso, collaborative recording artist, predominantly in Americana and folk music I believe, but she's also worked in other genres too, including metal and jazz. So very versatile. And Kimberley is a leader in Musicians Australia, which is the musicians section of MEAA.

In the middle we have Bronte Colmer. Bronte is a trade unionist and organiser at RAFFWU, the rogue Retail and Fast Food Workers Union, a newer union that has been successfully organising a pretty casualised and precarious and often very disempowered workforce in retail, including bookshop workers, which he'll tell you a little bit about shortly.

And just to my left, we have Maize Wallin who is a composer, sound designer and audio programmer. They specialise in video game audio and they are also a radio host at Byte Into IT on 3RRR's tech show. Maize is strongly engaged in the game development community and in activism and representation within it. They are the co-founder of I think maybe Australia's newest trade union, Game Workers Australia. So, welcome everybody.

So, Kimberley, I wanted to start with you if I may, and just if you could tell us a little bit about your role in the union, and perhaps a bit about what MEAA's been doing with this $250 minimum rate for musicians, and how that works?

Kimberley Wheeler: Yes, so Musicians Australia only started in 2018, and prior to that, freelance musicians didn't have any representation. There was a union that didn't do anything. And finally the MEAA did some research and decided, well actually we need to support freelance musicians.

Freelance musicians are not covered by any legislation in their work practices. There's no Fair Work. There's no Equal Opportunity. Even to the point that only in Victoria this year, if you are harassed in a pub at work, traditionally you would have to follow that up on your own, and it's only in Victoria that now the publican has to help you. So you kind of, you were on your own. And we've been in a situation where rates of pay are going down and down and down. And there's probably a little bit to talk about before we get to the 250. But probably a lot of Musicians Australia, the momentum behind it started at the inaugural Women in Music awards in Brisbane in 2018, around the time that the Musicians Australia started. And we started a women leaders group for Musicians Australia because there was, the disparity between what we were experiencing and what anyone else was was huge. But we also very quickly found that nothing was good in our industry and we'd be fighting tooth and nail for people who were also fighting to just stay above water.

So when the pandemic hit and we all lost all of our work, there was a tide of news that highlighted our situation, and then it came round to, you know, people, governments were going to put funding in. And we've never gotten the trickle down. Because trickle down doesn't work as we know. So we kind of came up with the idea, how can we control the situation when we, with what we've got at hand, when the government of the time hadn't returned any of our calls for two years prior to that, and it hadn't through, retrospectively didn't through the pandemic.

We proposed the idea of creating a minimum fee that was based on the live performance award which is offered to people who are employed, that covers, that was to cover freelance musicians when they worked where the government purse, the public purse was involved. So we approached various governments to say, hey look, you know this has been really crap for us, how about it? This is only fair that you know, this happens. And very quickly we got acceptance from a number of different states. It's still a work in progress, but for the first time we actually have a stepping stone. And there's a long way to ago, but we've managed to achieve a stepping stone without having any legislative change.

And that may change with the new Labor government. Certainly Tony Burke is really keen to initiate a minimum fee for freelancers. Because it's not just, I know it's not just our sector. I could

give you a small example, in 1973 it was still legal to pay women less than men for the same amount of work. Today, that delineation is, y'know, do you employ someone or do you just hire them as a contractor? It's a different way to discriminate in this modern day.

But that kind of is a summary of where we got to with the 250. There's a lot more to it than that.

JM: Yeah, thanks so much Kim, that's a really great overview of a quite complex kind of process, and it's really inspiring to hear about how much you can achieve without legislation or policy change, in a pretty hostile environment, during a very distressing period with the Covid kind of collapsing a lot of performers' incomes as well. So well done, bravissima.

I wanted to ask Bronte now if you could give us a little bit of an intro to RAFFWU's story and the kind of work that you're doing with retail and fast food workers?

Bronte Colmer: Yeah, sure. I'm not one for the stage usually. Yeah, so RAFFWU, for those who don't know, we formed, we've only been around for five or six years, it was sort of in the aftermath of, there was a Coles butcher case basically where this man named Duncan Hart took Coles to court to try to get their EBA overturned, and then basically it's a long story, but we formed in the aftermath of that.

A lot of people call us an upstart union. We do things pretty differently to a lot of other unions, we have absolutely no affiliation with the ACTU, we have no political affiliations with the Labor Party or the Greens party, or the other ones, you know. But so the way that we run things is pretty different. We're entirely member focused, I mean I know a lot of unions claim to be, but we are. Like I personally, I am a retail worker, I was taken off the shop floor at Woollies, I'd been there for twelve years, you know, and like a lot of our members, I felt trapped, you know, and this sort of was like a guiding light to get me out. But I think the key most important thing about RAFFWU ideologically is that we are entirely membership-led, unlike the other retail union that currently exists. We don't do anything unless a member asks us to. Everything is member-led and member initiative. I think that's probably the most important thing to know about RAFFWU, to start.

JM: Thank you. And Maize, how did you come to start your own union?

Maize Wallin: Hello. So, Game Workers United was and is an international movement, and it started after a particular kind of boil over of game workers around the world being exploited and some strikes and walkouts that happened at EA and Riot. And then there was a very – I feel like I'm very, like, 'one day I was born' haha. But then there's a really huge, over 60,000 people go to this conference in San Francisco called Game Developer Conference. And there was a panel there led by an industry body that was going to be like, 'Unions: do we need 'em? Probably not' is what they were going to say, but with so many attendees, we had all organised online, and using Discord, really gamer shit which is great, back then it was much more gamer than it is now. It's less cringe now.

But a heap of people came into this panel, that round table, and totally took that organisation off guard and shouted them down, and basically filibustered the place. It was sick, it was really cool. The next year we had zines, and the year after that, kind of, well the year after that was Covid, we didn't have much. And we all came home to our different countries and started our different branches. And Tim Colwill my co-convener and co-founder came to Melbourne and was like, this is what we're doing, and I, there's no union history in my family, we're all quite lower class but there wasn't that kind of engagement. And I work in audio, we're pretty much all freelance, and so I was a bit like well, what are we going to do about that? Like unions, okay, whatever. I've been a union member for as long as a game worker can have been, which is six months.

Since then we were organising on our own Discord, and we were doing contract reviews, we were being support people, for people in their, workers in their meetings, we were educating people on their rights, you know, this is what the award is, let's do it in a one-pager infographic on twitter,

you know, instead of navigating the Fair Work site. And doing surveys and actually publicising the inequality in our industry.

And then in 2020 we started to negotiate with Professionals Australia, because there's this rule that to become a national trade union you have to have a thousand members. And our, the entire Australian games industry is only surveyed to be between 1500 and 2000. So that wasn't going to happen. But also, you know, unionism and our knowledge of rights has been really stripped away in Australia since the '70s, the same decade when our industry started. So there's no knowledge in our industry.

I haven't worked in any other industry. I was in hospo in high school, but there's no knowledge there. So we're all learning at the same time. And even just being present and visible, our industry is improving so much. And then with the legal backing of Professionals Australia, we're – you know, we're all still kind of getting across what that actually means, and what kind of role unions play, and whether they're you know, more of a kind of a secretarial role or whether they do a lot of organising, or all of this kind of thing.

And you know, we were almost a branch of MEAA as well, but it just wasn't happening for us, you know. We sit right in the middle of arts and software. And so you know, I – to be honest I'm usually going to software conferences, and so it's really interesting to be like, yeah right, this is the other extreme. This is the other side, all right. And like, business-focused music conferences. So yeah, it's real different.

I think that arts impact, and this is what I'll finish on, that arts industry side, really shows itself in the shape of our industry. We have half of our industry is contractors, and small businesses, so maybe under ten people, and then the other half is sort of US owned companies with satellite studios here that might employ a hundred, two hundred people. And this is why Tim and I are such good partners, is because I come from all indie, I had one stake in AAA Hollywood big budget games, it was awful and I'm not going to do it again, and he came from AAA and then journalism, and when we, all of our initiatives have to have this split focus constantly and that's really ingrained in us, and yeah, that's where a lot of confusion comes as well for us, and where solidarity can be quite hard to deal with.

So I'm really, there's a really cool group of people on the stage, and I'm going to kind of pick all your brains, and cool people around here as well. So yeah, thanks for having me.

JM: I hope that was 'pick all your brains' and not 'pickle your brains'

MW: But then they could exist forever, like Futurama.

JM: True. So I'm going to tell you a little bit about the Freelance Charter and how my journey in MEAA kind of came about. So about ten years ago, I was asked to contribute a short story to *The Australian* newspaper, and they said that they couldn't pay me anything, but it would be great exposure.

Audience: Shame!

JM: And so I furiously sent off an email saying, ah, no. And I'd been a full-time writer for already five years at that time. And so I was quite cross about it, and I wrote a little article that went online at *Overland*. And it was very flattering for Sam to call this a movement earlier, but I started essentially a hashtag, called #paythewriters, and you know, it was sort of a way of trying to organise grassroots unionism within the literary sector. We're really under-represented, we're very under-unionised, we're very atomised, we're very taught to compete against each other, much like the other panelists were saying. And we're also very, I think, tentative about asking for what we deserve and asking for fair pay. At the time there was no transparency about what kind of pay rates were.

So yeah, I was doing that for a few years, and essentially trying to do sort of outreach to

writers, emerging writers in particular, and encouraging people not to work for exposure, and doing a lot of this kind of stuff. And I feel like, this is not thanks to me, but thanks to a lot of people I feel like the discourse on that has really shifted over the last decade.

But as a result of that kind of DIY campaigning I was invited to join the National Freelance Committee at MEAA about four or five years ago. And so that – the National Freelance Committee is much more journalism focused than I am as a writer, but I sort of slot into media section because a lot of my work could be construed as arts journalism, like criticism, essays, longform non-fiction, that sort of stuff sits neatly, whereas my creative practice doesn't really sit very neatly within MEAA.

And so after years of sort of moaning that the union wasn't doing enough for me, I realised that I was the person who had to be doing the thing that I wanted done. Which is a pretty obvious lesson, but I think we keep having to learn it. And so as part of the National Freelance Committee we've come up with this sort of mechanism of a way to get fair rates, superannuation, timely payment, the big issues that we identified, and so we've come up with this Freelance Charter, we had a big launch at the beginning of this year, and five hundred freelance journalists or freelance writers have endorsed the Charter which is huge. It was the biggest online meeting I think of any kind that MEAA had ever had. There was like 130 people there or something.

So that was really exciting, and felt very triumphant, and then we realised that we had to implement this damn thing. And so the six to eight months since have been a process of trying to go back and forth with specific publishers, figuring out who to target in the media, who we can maybe get some wins with. And so one of the strategies that we have is to unite with in-house staff journalists when they're negotiating their EBAs. And this worked quite well at Crikey a few years ago, I don't know if people remember but that was the first sort of time that freelancers and staff journalists stuck together and stuck to their guns and were like, 'No, not us without them too.' So that's a really important precedent that we're following. But we're also really kind of learning how this works as we go. And I think MEAA media has traditionally been quite good at looking after in-house journalists, and even though journalists aren't super well unionised, there is a strong union tradition in journalism, consistent since I think 1910 or something the AJA started. So it's sort of, I think, trying to build that capacity out to cover all of the precarious and contracted and kind of borderline workers that are also kind of getting messed around by publishers and media outlets.

So yeah, step by step I think. The minimum rates stuff at Musicians Australia is very inspiring for us, because it's also something that we want to kind of pursue, particularly with funding bodies, and government sources, because we feel like they're in a position and in fact they have a responsibility to set industry standards. Yeah, do you want to add...?

KW: Yeah I just, there are so many parallels with freelance writers as there are with freelance musicians. Just one other thing, or a couple of other things, like you've got a kind of a, I think you've got an online system where you can work out what everyone's being paid. And we started a parallel thing, and I think ours might have been first, called the gig map, it's now an app you can put on your phone and all that sort of thing, and you can put in where you played, what you got paid if you got paid, and how many of you were there, you know, other details, what you got paid each and so on and so forth.

But when we instituted our 250, we weren't really sure about it. We weren't really sure whether people would come to the party, our membership base would come to the party and say 'Yeah, this is something we support.' So we just sent out a questionnaire. And I know the whole of MEAA was a little bit flabbergasted because we got, I think we had something like 85% of our membership base respond, and of those who did respond 99.9% said yes. So it was a clear directive that this is what we need to do.

And that is, you know, it's one sticking point, a big sticking point, a big hurdle to overcome. And it has created an enormous amount of momentum within the union. It gives us something to talk about, as a basis for recruiting more people to our union. We are the fastest growing union, still, in Australia, and I should have looked up the numbers before I came here, but it's yeah, things are

happening. But this is only the beginning.

MW: I find that, you've both spoken about being really member-led, and you know, just kind of telling the union what to do whether it's MEAA or PA or no-one. And you know, those engagement statistics, yeah, PA would also be surprised by the engagement that we have. Do we need to change unions to – better?

KW: I don't have experience with other unions. This is my first union, this is the first time I have stepped up really, because before then I just, I just went along with things. Like most of the freelance music industry, you just, there was no other option. And then all of a sudden there was an option. And then I had the realisation, or I was empowered to know that yeah, I can do stuff that makes a difference.

BC: Yeah, I think on that point I would say, like, I'm not particularly well versed in the history of unions, I've only been in this position for about two years, and I didn't come from a union background particularly either, but I think definitely there needs to be restructuring of the larger unions. Like, it's hard for me to say, belonging to a union that's not attached to the ACTU, which is the Australian Council of Trade Unions for anyone that's unaware, the national body of unions basically. But what I have seen of the actions led by those unions is usually pretty poor, very partisan, very very partisan, I mean, to this day half of Labor MPs come straight from the union movement, and in a lot of ways I think a lot of the, a lot of the higher ups in the larger unions see it as a pathway to politics. Not as a way to solve the structural issues within society, which is what it should be. So I think there definitely needs to be change. In terms of what, you know, it's a big question.

KW: I just, I totally agree with that structural thing. Another thing I did is I went and joined the Labor party. And I thought, I didn't realise what was going on under the surface, but I think there is a real movement to make some change, because the reality is that 80% of Labor members are not part of factions or unions. And I don't know how that's going to play out. But there are wheels in action and I totally agree that, you know, these newer unions, we can write the book on how we do it. We can. And it's a much more consultative process and agile process, than you know, bending your ways to suit someone else.

JM: Yeah, and I think one of the exciting things about organising in the arts is that we are very creative. We're used to being nimble. We're used to changing with, like, massive structural shifts in our working conditions happen quite regularly, seemingly with every change of government/pandemic, so we're used to kind of flying by the seat of our pants. And we're used to kind of DIY. And I think increasingly, as well, I was really inspired by what Nat Harkin said about the arts being a place where Aboriginal women could be in sovereignty. And I'm very inspired by the sense of the arts and unions as democratic spaces. Spaces of people power, where we organise ourselves together for mutual benefit. Is that something that you see as an agenda in your union work as well? Like, is there a democratic process as part of your organising that you have discovered?

MW: Yeah, I think when we started, it was, whoever wants to do things do them, which was really cool, and then as we got bigger and bigger we were like oh, there are, we still get momentum from people who are in the movement but their engagement is just saying, like a thumbs up emoji every now and then, like that's still so nice. And that's, my feeling is that that's often what democracy is as well, is often validation that you're doing the right thing. And yeah, whether you know, sometimes it's while there's a lot of different agendas so we come together to figure out how we can address them all, and that's where it can get complicated, and really kind of enlivening. But on the very simple level, it's like a 'Yes! Still approve of what you're doing,' you haven't gone off the

rails or anything, like we, yeah. Validation tick.

BC: Yeah I think having a democratic system within a union is incredibly important. That's what I was trying to get at in the intro part is that everything we do is member focused. So I don't know, like I said I have never worked for another union, so I don't know structurally how they are, interiorly – is that a word? I don't know – but we run with a committee which is just members, anybody can go for the committee. We run a vote every year for committee members and on top of that we also run a series of caucuses, where we have things such as we have a women's caucus, a queer caucus, a casual workers caucus which is just another sort of avenue for those whose voices tend to get absorbed by the white men like me. So we put a lot of emphasis on democracy within the union, definitely.

KW: As our leadership group started as a women's group, when we decided to make that pivot we very much said no, we're not going to let what has been come into it, and we're going to be diverse and open. We've approached it from that point of view, and anyone's welcome to come and have a say. Largely, musicians, freelance musicians don't. They don't have a culture of standing up and there's often that, you don't want to stand up because you won't get booked for that festival or you'll get a bad name around town or something like that. So there's this sort of us vs them kind of artists and the, you'll be penalised by the rest of the industry who've kind of dictated things for a long time.

So it's encouraging people to stand up, so it does feel more like democracy is on the agenda and trying to empower people that they can have a say. But on the other hand there are those people that just want to pay their membership fee and know that they're supporting what's going on. And that's cool too. But it only really changes if we all, the more people we have stand up and the more people we have as members.

MW: As a solidarity member of the Musicians Union, thank you! More validation, it's good.

But I think that you hit on something really key as well, it's that democracy isn't just about voting, it's about being informed and having a consistent chance to have your voice, which is maybe where the larger unions who haven't been able to be nimble, maybe that's one of the things. Because, you know, I think they all have committees, and they all have voting and that kind of thing, but do they have the monthly national meetings, or do they have all of the working groups of all the members, and you know, are they constantly being talked at by their members? What I have found is no. Is that the members are un-engaged, and they don't know how to talk to them or what they can ask the union to do.

KW: Or they're just, they're all so time poor. Because they're running around doing three jobs to try and make their way through. And that's a whole other issue.

JM: And I think that's very related, Kim, to the arts specifically as well. Because part of the problem of the scarcity and the precarity is that everybody's working harder for less, and that organising is also work, so. I'm in this really unique position this year with this residency at Vitalstatistix which I've just been using for my agenda to organise the arts [laughs], but often this kind of work happens, if it doesn't happen from unions, it happens from people doing PhDs, and then that's problematic as well because you're also beholden to another institution with its own agenda. And so how do we resource people to be able to do the work of organising as artists? Anyone got an answer?

MW: When you invited me here I asked if I could tack on an extra day so that we could have a game workers meetup last night, which was really great. And you all were able to pay for an extra hotel night, so that was nice, thanks.

JM: Yeah, I think you know, working with universities sometimes helps because they have resources you can borrow!

I think as well there's this kind of, I guess the question of sustainability and reciprocity in the arts and in the union movement as well. Like, how do we support each other, in our different jobs and our different fields, to do the work that we're doing. And part of today, I think, is maybe, well for me it's really about building that solidarity across different art forms and different unions and different workplaces. Because you know, I can tunnel my way into the Australian Journalists Association as much as I like, but that's still not my happy place, like, my happy place is in the arts community. And that's where my friends and colleagues are. So, like, working across kind of different platforms, and maybe there's a way that we can empower each other to keep doing the work that we're doing.

Speaking of solidarity, I wanted to ask, Bronte, if you could talk a little bit about the campaign that happened at Better Read Than Dead, between booksellers and authors? This makes me really happy, this story.

BC: Yeah, I sure can. Just give me a second to get my notes up. Just as a disclaimer, I was not involved in this campaign, so I probably can't go too in-depth on Q and A stuff.

So if anyone's unaware, Better Read Than Dead, great commie name for a bookstore. First of all I should acknowledge the Gadigal land that the bookstore is set in, which is in Newtown, Sydney. So the campaign, a Better Read Than Dead member reached out to us late 2020 with some concerns about how the store was being run. Pretty standard stuff among retail and most low-paying industries, you know, rampant casualisation and mostly like an endemic issue with bullying and harassment. So there were a lot of issues in the workplace that couldn't be directly solved easily. So we pretty quickly came to the conclusion that the best way forward for the store would be to enact an EBA for them, because they didn't have one at all, they were just on the award.

If anyone doesn't know, EBA, Enterprise Bargaining Agreement, which is really hard to get, and that's pretty much the premise of this story, is that, like, it's a really difficult and really rewarding thing. I think the Better Read Than Dead members spent over a year fighting for this, probably closer to a year and a half, it was still ongoing into early this year, nearly, sort of just ended up last year. And it was tough. But I think the thing, going back to the question of how can we recompense artists as organisers, I think one of the key things at the Better Read Than Dead campaign was the community support. I think the most important thing about Better Read. Sorry, I'm jumping my timeline a bit here, I'm just rambling.

So basically the members at Better Read Than Dead put in an application for a majority support determination, which is a fancy way of saying 'We want an EBA,' basically. And the way that the legislation is set up basically means that the business can either accept or reject it. And they rejected it, which is usually pretty standard. And then because of that, the Better Read Than Dead workers were able to apply for a protected action ballot order, which allows protected industrial action.

So this was the first time this had happened in retail for fifty years in Australia.

Audience member: Woo!

BC: Yeah. Bloody awesome.

JM: And also, that's terrible.

BC: Yeah. Well I think it raises a good point, because the reason it's taken that long is because there has been an established union in the sector who has been actively telling its workforce that they cannot take industrial action. That's the reason.

So it's pretty big, and the community response was huge. So I'm not sure, I mean everyone here has probably read twenty times more books than me, but there was a, we got a list of authors

from around the country sent in on *Overland*, they sent in a petition supporting our workers, and we ended up with 295 signatures which is pretty crazy, like a lot of big-name authors just all across the country. And there were multiple, we've run two public actions, basically small rallies in Newtown, Sydney, around the store, with hundreds of community members showing up. We've run Zoom forums where we've had the MUA, which is the Maritime Union, the secretary spoke, the CFMEU secretary spoke to show their solidarity. So it really was a big deal, like across union barriers, I think. A lot of people were excited for there to finally be some action in retail.

And I think we're still seeing repercussions today. We announced earlier this week that Readings in Melbourne is taking industrial action tomorrow, so that's pretty awesome. And hopefully, you know, it's very early days, but hopefully we can end up with a similar situation to Better Read Than Dead.

So yeah, Better Read Than Dead, they took industrial action back in July last year, and it wasn't strike action, they took five forms of action, mostly minor; the key two were they refused to process online orders and returns to the publisher. Ad two days after they enacted that, they got their EBA approved. So let the SDA tell you that direct action doesn't work, I don't know.

But then unfortunately, a few months later in October, Better Read Than Dead reneged their offer. Which is why we had to run a second rally, as I mentioned. And then we also re-enacted the industrial action in December, and just a few days after that they went back on the EBA.

And now Better Read Than Dead has easily one of the best EBAs in the retail industry across the country. They've got 26 weeks paid guaranteed parental leave. They've got a pathway to a $25 living wage for all staff. They have junior wages, if you don't know, if you're under 21 you don't get paid 100% of a wage, you get paid less and less depending on how old you are. That will be abolished at the store once you've worked there for a year or 700 hours, whichever is sooner. And a lot of cool clauses like that which basically nowhere has. So yeah, basically, good stuff Better Read Than Dead workers. I'm real proud.

JM: It's fantastic and it's really good to see. I am 100% certain that Readings will have the same level if not more support from writers. I already tweeted telling people not to buy my books there until management agrees to raise the wages of the staff. So like, little things like that do count and hopefully we'll get something organised with RAFFWU again. I think that thing of like, when you reach out the solidarity is there, is a really really important lesson of that campaign. And just the, you know, a lot of people who work in bookshops and writers are the same people at different points in their career, as well. And so of course the solidarity is there.

My question's gone out of my head now. Well, it's actually time for questions from everybody else, conveniently [laughs].

Yes absolutely, Maize is going to talk about solidarity now.

MW: It's quite, yeah, it's really interesting talking about, you know, the solidarity is there when, from people outside of the industry. Because one of the things that we've really unionised around is harassment, not only from within your workplace but from consumers. The whole toxic gamer thing. And you know, there are parts of that audience that group together and campaign to get workers fired, for crappy reasons. And so part of what we need to do in workplaces also is teach management and bosses and also workers how to support each other when a worker is being targeted like that. And how not to necessarily believe what the consumers are saying, or like, just try to wade through all of that kind of thing. And you know, sometimes it's about cybersecurity, and sometimes it's about just propaganda, and that kind of thing.

And I wonder, you know, like there's book readers, and music listeners, and is there anything like that? Is there ever like consumers being like, 'I don't think that the Woollies workers deserve more money?'

BC: Oh yeah, definitely. It's, I think it's a deliberate product of many years of neoliberal politics forcing people against each other. And that's why class solidarity is so important and that's why I

think Better Read Than Dead is so important. It might just be a small bookshop in Sydney, but there's two hundred thousand retail workers across Australia, and if they know that they could just go to their work tomorrow and do this, why the fuck wouldn't they? You know? So yeah, I think so.

KW: There's definitely been a lot of pushback to this 250 thing that we did, from within our own ranks even. Because people didn't think they were worthy, partly. Or on the other end of the scale, they were worried that if they're earning a lot more than that, that they would be, their rates would go down. But we've made sure that that is a minimum, not a payment rate. But the biggest pushback we have had is from industry, who have had an advantage for so many decades. They're fighting to hold onto an advantage in a growing industry. And that's going to be a really big challenge.

There are also punters, customers who do push back because ultimately it's probable they're going to have to pay something at the door... shhh [microphone dies]

Yeah, there's been pushback from all sorts of areas, and we're looking at cultural change as well, within our ranks, with outside of our ranks, you know. And there was a lot of talk earlier about putting a value on what we do. And we have to band together to do that. Because one of our big calls in Musicians Australia is no undercutting. And it's just, there is a whole industry that supports the networks of undercutting where, you know, theoretically people are meant to have an ABN when they do a gig, but the cash industry is alive and well and it supports exploitation and undercutting and just, I don't know, we need the solidarity, but that's just hard to at this stage recruit everybody and get everybody to understand the impact of what they do. If you go and accept a gig for fifty bucks, you're actually accepting fifty bucks as the level for the whole industry, and people just don't realise that.

JM: And that sort of working for exposure thing doesn't just happen to people in early career, you know. I am extremely vocal around this stuff. My personal brand is unionising writers, and I still get asked to work for free sometimes.

And I will volunteer. I will write things for friends, or I will do a work trade with artists, I'll write an artist statement for a friend who's a painter, regularly, and I'll do that as a reciprocal exchange. But you know, I can't believe how rife it is in the industry, that it is just built on unpaid labour. Built on underpaid labour. And we have to stick together and say enough is enough, I think.

Would anyone like to ask a question with our one surviving microphone?

Audience member: I'm interested in hearing more about organising through Discord?

MW: It's pretty interesting. Well obviously, I find all of this nerdy shit interesting.

So with our membership we have tiers, and our tier zero – because programmers index at zero, we don't start at one – thank you to whoever got that – it is a community membership, and so the worker or small business owner, because that's what we need to do in our industry, will fill out that form and they will say what their email is and what their name is and how they want to get involved in the community, like at what level of engagement they're interested in, and their history with unions. And especially at the start, but also now, especially when particular workplaces have announced something that might be a little harsh, we vet those people who come into the Discord.

And then once they're in the Discord they can tag themselves as employer or worker or both, half of us are both, and then there's different channels for working and organising different internal initiatives, whether that's because an event is coming up or whether, you know, environmentalism is back on the agenda and we have working groups around that, we've found it's really important to be quite dynamic with the channels that are in the Discord, like make new ones, archive, bring them back, that kind of stuff. And then we also, and this is actually inspired by Professionals Australia's Discord, because they have one too, we have private channels for working groups at workplaces as well. And then those channels, they will be headed by a delegate or a would-be delegate at that workplace, and each worker gets vetted by them and added in, in case there's any bad actors from

management, or snitches or whatever. And that channel will be shared by Game Workers Australia officers, as well as Professionals Australia delegates.

So I think what I'm getting at is that there's layers of security, and it's not just a Discord link out in the open. But that there's also this huge layer of transparency in that all of the workers are seeing most of what's being done, and there's that, you know, lurking thing of all of these solidarity members actually get to see a lot. And we get to hear their little emoji voices a lot. And they get to see, you know, our monthly convener's reports, and our agendas and our minutes, and all of these things are regularly posted there. And you know, there's a great search function in Discord, and unlike Slack it doesn't archive your messages, so it's there for ages.

There are security and UX improvements that could be made. And as games workers we're very across bug reports and wish lists, and we make our own bots, and stuff, we have someone who's working on a Game Workers Australia bot for us that does a few things. So, yeah. Discord's been really good.

And I think, so 50% of games made in Australia are in Melbourne and we get a lot of state funding compared to everywhere else. And the federal policies are often driven by Melbourne, or Wurundjeri and Bunurong land as well. So us being quite national, my co-convener Tim is based in Perth, so it's like giving the whole country a bit of a hug with us, it kind of allows us to share that experience with other states, you know when there's grant applications, they get to draw on the Melbourne muscle memory that we have around that. Yeah, it's quite important that it's national and that it's everyone and that huge layer of transparency.

Even, so my partner is not very engaged in the union movement, he's also a game developer, but they've said to me, 'Every now and then when I get an @everyone announcement or an @here it's just cool to see that there's stuff happening.' And that's, you know, I think that isn't in a lot of other unions. You know, the stuff happening, instead of the, every now and then I vote. Thanks for the question.

JM: That was cool and it also reminded me of a, one of the mechanisms that we have, an unofficial mechanism in the Freelance Committee is we have a WhatsApp group. And it's a really simple thing, but the solidarity of that, being able to message each other. I was really moved when the war in Ukraine started and there was this conversation on the WhatsApp group between a Sri Lankan journalist and a journalist from the former Yugoslavia and they were both experienced in war trauma and talking about how they could help journalists in the Ukraine. And as a result of that we put out some solidarity statements and tried to take some action and stuff. And that kind of thing, you know, you need to have the communication mechanism there in order to build that, but it's very very strong when the relationship's made available.

MW: We work a lot internationally, there's a lot of industry here that is US-owned and stuff, and we run into a lot of different worker laws and different worker cultures. And the Australian industry is much more similar to South-East Asian industries and South Africa and South America. And every now and then – quite often – there's friction with European and North American organisers. How do you deal with that international unionisation effort?

JM: We draw a lot of solidarity from international movements. The Freelance Solidarity project in the US is hugely inspiring. In New York State it is now illegal to pay freelancers late. They've just been doing incredible work.

But there's also, you know, it creates problems in the industry as well. So one of the campaigns we're trying to get through at the moment is at The Guardian, and The Guardian is claiming that because they're an international company that they're not subject to kind of any suggestions or coercion from an Australian-based union because they couldn't possibly change their rules, and we're like, 'I don't think that's how it works.'

But yeah, so there are obstacles with that, and I think the answer to it is kind of, you know, keeping each other informed and knowing to call bullshit on that stuff a little bit. Because really, we

can change the rules ourselves. We can make the conditions of our work better ourselves. Like, we're not necessarily beholden to laws and rules and regulations. Those things change. We change them. So I think that's really important to remember.

Unless anybody has a quick question, we're going to take another break.

BC: This was, I've been thinking about it, it was a question to the earlier panel about the living wage or UBI. And I just wanted to comment on that and say that, I mean, regardless of how you feel about it, I believe it should be implemented, but that will never be implemented with a top-down political approach. It will be implemented with a bottom-up, workplace by workplace approach. And once enough workplaces adopt that, the government will. It's not going to happen through trying to get Labor to agree to it. I mean, we're in a political situation where we're celebrating the fact that for the first time in five years wages have risen with inflation. That's what we're dealing with. We're never going to get a living wage by going to the government. It has to be through workplace organising. And that's all I wanted to say.

[Applause]