

# Australian union ramps up nationalist campaign against guest workers

Terry Cook  
4 February 2013

Since the beginning of the year, Australia's largest construction union has been conducting a reactionary nationalist campaign targeting guest workers with the intent of scapegoating them for rising unemployment in the construction, mining and manufacturing sectors.

The restrictive 457 temporary work visas scheme allows Australian companies to employ overseas workers for up to four years, provided they can demonstrate the recruitment is necessary to fill skills shortages. Those employed under the scheme must receive the same wages and conditions as their Australian counterparts.

Two weeks ago, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) called on the federal Labor government to impose a freeze on the recruitment of tradespeople on 457 visas. CFMEU national secretary Dave Noonan declared: "The fact that the government is allowing a blowout in 457 and other temporary work visas when tens of thousands of construction jobs are being lost is just crazy policy." He claimed "too many employers are rorting the visa system to get cheap compliant labour."

The union also made an extraordinary submission last month to the Senate inquiry considering a draft Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Bill aimed at amalgamating existing statutes covering age, disability, race, sex and other forms of discrimination. It called for employers to discriminate against guest workers when implementing sackings.

"Our view is that commonwealth and state anti-discrimination laws should explicitly provide that discrimination by employers in favour of Australian citizens and permanent residents not be prohibited by the consolidation legislation," the submission stated. It demanded overseas workers be sacked first in any downsizing or restructure.

So much for the declaration on the CFMEU's web site proclaiming the union "welcomes migrants to our industry" and takes a "stance against all forms of racism and sectarianism". In fact, the union's persecution of immigrant workers is not new. It has a history of informing on so-called "illegal" immigrants on construction sites to immigration authorities, resulting in police raids and deportations.

The union campaign has nothing to do with defending jobs in the construction industry or stopping the exploitation of guest workers that undoubtedly takes place by employers seeking "cheap, compliant labour". The real purpose of whipping up this "Australia first" nationalism is to divert attention from the ongoing job destruction taking place under the Labor government and the role of the unions in enforcing the restructuring demanded by big business.

Since the onset of the global economic crisis in 2008, large sections of the economy have been devastated. In manufacturing alone more than 130,000 jobs have been eliminated. By the CFMEU's own estimate, some 68,000 construction jobs were destroyed over the same period. Following last year's marked slowdown in the Chinese economy, investment and output in the mining industry has also declined, with the axing of 10,000 jobs.

In every instance, the unions blocked any fight by workers to defend jobs and working conditions. Last year, the CFMEU oversaw the "orderly closure" of several coal mines including the BHP Billiton Mitsubishi (BMA) Norwich Park and Gregory open cut pits in Queensland. Hundreds of jobs were destroyed.

In construction, the CFMEU has collaborated with companies to drive up productivity through the imposition of greater "flexibility", the dismantling of protective work practices and the policing of ever more

stringent deadlines. These processes not only cut back on jobs but also undermine safety. According to the latest official statistics, 30 workers died in the construction industry during 2010-11—second only to the number of deaths in agriculture.

The CFMEU's nationalist campaign is being openly backed by sections of the Labor Party. Senator Doug Cameron, the national convenor of the party's so called "left" faction, has called for a "hard-headed analysis on the need for 457 visas" and "a reassessment of the numbers of 457s required given the downturn in manufacturing, building and construction."

It is no accident that the scapegoating of guest workers comes in an election year. Like the targeting of refugees, the attacks on "foreign" workers will be used to divert public attention from the responsibility of the Gillard government, backed by the unions, for the avalanche of job losses and the slashing of essential social services.

The federal government, which has been careful not to alienate the major mining corporations, has not yet commented on the CFMEU's call for a freeze on the issuing of 457 visas. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Julia Gillard signalled the introduction of new procedures to give priority to "Australian jobs" when the government came under criticism for approving guest workers for the Roy Hill project.

The mining industry unions denounced the recruitment of 1,700 overseas workers for the \$9.5 billion Roy Hill mining project in Western Australia that is being developed by a consortium led by Australia's wealthiest person, Gina Rinehart. Australian Workers Union (AWU) national secretary Paul Howes, a key political backer of Gillard, described the hiring of guest workers at Roy Hill as "sheer lunacy". The CFMEU in Western Australia launched an openly chauvinist campaign, paying for newspaper and radio advertisements denouncing "foreign workers taking your jobs."

The unions have a long history of whipping up nationalism and racism to divide the working class, going back to the xenophobic White Australia policy that remained in force until the 1960s. The unions subsequently backed immigration restrictions and the compulsory detention of refugees initiated by Labor in the 1980s and extended under the succeeding governments.

Workers must reject the unions' attacks on "foreign" workers and champion the right of workers to live and work in any country of their choosing with full citizenship rights. The profit system, not guest workers and refugees, are to blame for rising levels of joblessness and the destruction of social services. Any struggle to defend jobs necessitates a political break from those who defend capitalism, including the unions and Labor Party, and a unified fight by workers across national borders. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees in every workplace for a workers' government and socialist policies.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**