

Australia: Chinese immigrant meatworkers locked out after protesting alleged assault

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5 January 2021

More than 100 Chinese immigrant meat workers in Warrnambool, Victoria, were locked out last month after staging a protest in defence of a colleague allegedly assaulted by a company supervisor. The incident underscores the appalling working conditions endured by many migrant workers with insecure Australian visas.

Midfield Group employs over 1,500 workers, with most of these at its abattoir in Warrnambool, Victoria, a regional town 225 kilometres west of Melbourne. Approximately 150 of the meatworks' employees are Chinese workers on 457 and other temporary working visas.

One of these workers, Benson Wang, a 29-year-old worker from the Fujian district of China, was involved in an altercation with a supervisor on December 15. According to Wang's account provided to the Chinese-language *Sydney Today* publication, the supervisor verbally abused him over a plant equipment issue. Wang grabbed his hand in an attempt to make the supervisor accompany him to senior management to make a complaint, and the supervisor then punched him several times in the face and head.

Wang subsequently complained to police and was treated in hospital for concussion.

The following day, more than 100 Chinese workers met in the parking lot of the Midfield meatworks to discuss taking action in defence of their colleague. They were subsequently locked out by management. One of the company's family owners, Dean McKenna, issued an expletive-laden denunciation of the workers, accusing them of spreading "lies" about their visa status to the local media.

Some of the workers have accused the company of failing to properly support their applications for permanent residency in Australia. About half of the

Chinese workers have children who attend school in Warrnambool, and some of them only speak English. The families could nevertheless be forced to go back to China if their visas are not processed. Of the 150 Chinese workers at the plant, 50 are in the last year of their temporary work visas and 29 will reach the end of their contracts in January.

Management, however, insist that the processing of visa applications is solely a matter for the federal government.

Corporate abuses of 457 and related "guest worker" visas are well documented, including in the meat industry. There are more than 2 million temporary visa holders in Australia, with successive Labor and Liberal governments working on behalf of big business to expand the pool of super-exploited workers who have few rights. Temporary visa holders have no access to public health care or welfare, and are often tied to working for a single employer who can revoke sponsorship for permanent residency.

The Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) documented some abuses in a submission to a 2015 federal senate inquiry, detailing discrimination, agent fees, harassment and bullying of temporary visa holders. The union added that some companies, fearing that guest workers who receive permanent residency will quit their abattoir jobs, have allegedly "refused these [permanent residency] applications, keeping foreign staff on 457 visas for as long as 11 years."

The union is responsible for enforcing the appalling working conditions endured by all meatworkers, Australian and immigrant. The bureaucracy's privileges are earned by policing the meat industry on behalf of corporate management, sabotaging any initiative by workers to fight for decent wages and conditions.

This role was sharply demonstrated in the Midfield Group dispute. On December 17, two days after Benson Wang was allegedly assaulted, AMIEU officials travelled to Warrnambool and quickly shut down the industrial action while selling out Wang.

A deal to end the lockout and resume work on December 18 saw the union agree to Wang's sacking. The alleged perpetrator of the assault meanwhile continues in his position on the plant floor.

AMIEU official Paul Conway told the *Warrnambool Standard* that demands for this supervisor's sacking had "fallen on deaf ears" and that Midfield's senior manager "is set like concrete that he won't allow him [Wang] to return to that place to work ever."

Conway added: "We believe it was paramount to try and get the workers back in there."

There could not be a more explicit recognition of the union's role as strike-breaker. Officials saw their "paramount" priority as ending the Chinese workers' principled act of solidarity with their victimised colleague.

While the union now collects dues from an additional group of workers, nothing has been resolved by its return-to-work deal. Police declined to lay any charges over Wang's alleged assault. The company has refused to allow workers to view CCTV coverage of the plant, insisting that the altercation took place in a blind spot and so was not recorded. WorkSafe, the state health and safety regulator, is reportedly investigating Wang's complaint.

Comments by workers on a report in the Chinese-language *Sydney Today* underscore the appalling working conditions that will continue in the Midfield abattoir.

"We have been exploited and bullied for a long time," one wrote. "We are under intense pressure every day, which has become a norm in the factory. Supervisors often insult and assault employees and have a condescending attitude. [...] After Benson was injured, the factory should have assisted Benson to go to the hospital and suspended the attacker's work. However, the actual result was that the attacker was still working, and many people saw him smiling and didn't care about it. This shows that in this factory, supervisor bullying has become the norm!"

Another worker explained how management had threatened them after the walkout. "On the morning of

the 17th, we returned to the factory and once again expressed our wish to communicate, but the boss verbally abused us and told us to get out. They said that our report was untrue and discredited the factory. They asked us to change the previous report and praise Midfield as an excellent factory! Otherwise we will lose our job and lose our visa!"

An additional comment read: "I must speak up! My brother has been working in this meat factory for three years. He has been a cheerful person since he was young, but since he entered this factory, he has become depressed. Everything is like a nightmare. Every time I call, I hear him complain about how the factory management treats Chinese employees harshly. You are not allowed to take time off if you are sick, or you will be sent back to your country, or you will be sent back to your country if your work is slow, or you will be sent back to your country if you have a dispute with your supervisor."

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges Midfield meatworkers to form a rank and file committee, independent of the AMIEU, uniting workers of all nationalities in the plant in the fight for decent working conditions, an end to the abuse of temporary visa holders, and an end to all victimisations. Benson Wang must be reinstated and the union's collaboration with Midfield management's targeting of the worker opposed.

The fight for decent working conditions for all workers in the meat industry is inseparable from a political struggle against all reactionary immigration laws, including 457 and related visas. All working people ought to have the right to live and work where they wish, with full rights. This perspective is alone advanced by the Socialist Equality Party, and we urge Midfield and other meatworkers to contact us and develop a discussion on these issues.



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