

Australia: Victimised Chinese meatworker speaks with the WSWS

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with Benson Wang, a Chinese immigrant meatworker who was allegedly assaulted and subsequently victimised at an abattoir operated by Midfield Group in Warrnambool, Victoria.

The WSWS article on the incident and published January 5, detailed the appalling working conditions in the plant and the mistreatment of immigrant workers on insecure 457 and other “guest worker” visas. It also exposed the role of the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU), which collaborated with the company to end the Chinese workers’ solidarity action with Wang, getting them back to work without any company concessions on working conditions and without any end to Wang’s victimisation.

The article has been widely circulated within the abattoir. Wang told the WSWS through an interpreter: “When I read your article on the *World Socialist Web Site*, I thought that it was objective, and stands for the workers.”

The 27-year-old worker is originally from Fuzhou, in the eastern Chinese province of Fujian. His parents are farmers, and he previously spent three years working in a pork abattoir.

This experience qualified him for a 457 “temporary work” visa in 2016. These visas allow immigrants to live and work in Australia, but with very few rights. Workers are tied to the employer that sponsors them, and cannot change jobs unless a new employer agrees to take over the sponsorship role. Numerous corporate abuses of 457 visa workers have been extensively documented over the past two decades, but successive Labor and Liberal governments have made no effort to resolve the issues. The visa scheme has worked as intended, providing business with a pool of super-exploited cheap labour.

Wang told the WSWS about conditions in the Warrnambool abattoir. “The supervisors always use really terrible words, telling workers to hurry up. They always use those cursing words. Also, for toilet breaks, workers need to work 3 to 4 hours straight. When they ask to use the toilet, they are refused and are told to get back to work.”

He discussed the altercation with a supervisor on December 15 that led to his sacking. “I brought a tool to work, I didn’t know I shouldn’t have brought it. I had seen other people use a similar one at work. Then I was told I shouldn’t use it. But it was a smoko break, so I put the tool down where I usually leave my other tools. Then the supervisor came to me and used very rude words to demand I put it away. Because he used very terrible curse words, I wanted to have him come to the office, to argue in front of the boss together. Then he refused, and punched me in the face.”

Wang was concussed in the incident and later sought medical treatment. He described Midfield management’s response: “The boss didn’t listen to me at all, he just listened to the supervisor about the incident. Then he told me I shouldn’t have punched the supervisor first. I requested that the boss check the CCTV footage, because the camera should have captured who threw the first punch. But the boss didn’t care about that at all, he just took my work card away and sent me home. He didn’t send me to the hospital.”

He continued: “Later that day, news of the incident spread. All the Chinese workers wanted to know how the factory would deal with the issue, because what happened wasn’t fair. Then the next morning when the Chinese workers gathered in the carpark, they were told that if they didn’t start work within half an hour, the boss said that all of them would be fired. Then a while later he just locked the gate. There was no explanation

given about the incident. The day after that, workers again met together in the carpark. Then the boss made a speech and urged them to leave. Someone recorded what the boss said that morning, it spread on social media.”

In this highly aggressive and threatening address, the Midfield manager insisted that none of the workers would be allowed back unless what he called their “lies” about working conditions in the plant were publicly retracted.

He also issued a thinly-veiled threat to instigate the deportation of the workers. Accusing Wang of assaulting the supervisor, and falsely claiming that he would be charged by police, the manager declared: “He will, I would think, be removed from Australia, Australia does not want people like Benson.... I have contacted the government—all discussion about visa [the workers’ permanent residency applications] is off, all discussion. I personally rang the immigration minister yesterday.”

Later that same day, officials with the AMIEU arrived in Warnambool. Victorian Branch Secretary Paul Conway told local journalists that “it was paramount to try and get the workers back in there.” The union’s intervention ended the Chinese workers’ principled defence of their victimised colleague.

Wang did not want to criticise the union when speaking with the WSWS. The record nevertheless clearly demonstrates the bureaucracy’s privileged role within the meat industry as a collaborator with the corporate abattoir operators.

Wang spoke about the victimisation of other workers who had spoken out in his defence. “After the incident, some workers have been arranged to work in those dirtier and more tiring working spots,” he explained. “They are being moved there as a punishment. Also, on Christmas Day, all workers got a bonus \$50 voucher—except all of those who went to the carpark after I was assaulted. This includes backpackers and other overseas workers, they all got the voucher. For me, it’s not about the \$50, it’s about the humiliation. It’s unbelievable.”

Wang explained that he has decided to return to China. “At the beginning I hoped to get permanent residency in Australia one day, but after this incident and all these problems I’m facing, even though I feel Australia has such a good living environment, I am

afraid to keep living here. So finally, I have decided to go back. I don’t want to leave the country... I didn’t throw the first punch at the supervisor. It’s not because of me that this incident happened. But I’m speaking out because I want to leave with a clear, good reputation.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* again 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. We urge Midfield and other meatworkers to contact us and discuss these crucial political issues.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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