

# New revelations of abusive conditions confronting immigrant workers in Australian meatworks industry

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Investigative reports, published in the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* (*SMH*) last month, have shed further light on the exploitative and dangerous conditions confronting workers, especially immigrant workers, in Australia's meatworks industry.

In December last year, an industrial dispute erupted independently of the trade unions at Midfield Meats, a major abattoir in Warrnambool, regional Victoria. About 100 Chinese immigrant workers staged a protest and were then locked out, after one worker, 27-year-old Benson Wang, was allegedly assaulted by a supervisor in the plant.

The Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) quickly shut down the protest action, sending the workers back into the plant, accepting Wang's sacking and allowing the supervisor to get off scot free. The *World Socialist Web Site* defended Wang, publishing an interview with him before he returned to China.

The *Age-SMH* investigation highlighted the shadowy role of labour hire agencies, which reap enormous profits by funnelling Chinese workers into the meatworks, often with false promises of permanent residency in Australia.

An operator of one of these agencies, known as "Melbourne Jack," posted on the Chinese language social media platform WeChat in 2017: "Productivity means there's no easy job, here's not a charity... Women need to see themselves like men, men need to see themselves like beasts, beasts need to see themselves as robots."

An email sent by recruiters to an Australian corporate client in 2018, included the boast: "These people are properties."

Court documents filed in 2018 by the Australian Taxation Office indicated that the biggest overseas recruitment agency recorded \$350 million in income, between 2009 and 2017. This involved supplying thousands of workers to 42 meatworks.

Some of this income is derived from fees paid by Chinese and Vietnamese workers, of between \$20,000 and \$70,000. The *Age-SMH* reported: "Some of this is used to cover immigration agent fees and other government charges, but much of it is booked as profit by recruitment syndicates." Chinese workers reported that five years ago, they had been told by a Midfield Meats representative in China, before they signed on that, after three and a half years, the company would sponsor them as part of the process to achieve permanent residency status in Australia. Midfield now blames the federal government for delaying this procedure, but at the same time knows full well that if workers did achieve secure visa status they would look for alternative jobs.

The workers' insecure immigration status creates enormous pressures on their families, with many having children who attend local schools in Warrnambool.

The *Age-SMH* reported that in February, a 16-year-old child of one of the Chinese Midfield Meats workers, committed suicide. One worker commented: "His parents were from the group who joined Midfield the earliest and worked there for four years... The insecurity of PR [permanent residency] has made the parents anxious and desperate, and that might have some impacts on the kids."

Corporate meatworks owners have reaped enormous profits from the super-exploitation of immigrant labour.

Midfield Meats is owned by Colin McKenna, who ranks in the *Australian* rich list, with a personal fortune of \$462 million. In 2020, the Midfield Group made \$30 million profit on sales of \$721 million. The company employs 1,500 workers, centred around its meatworks. As well as from China, there are workers from Vietnam, East Timor and Pacific Island nations.

The conditions endured by the meatworkers are akin to those depicted in Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle*, on the American meat industry, in the early 20th century,

The *Age-SMH* published a shocking photo of a Chinese meatworker's arthritic hands, with every knuckle deformed and badly swollen. The worker's injuries show the damage inflicted after five years at the abattoir.

An estimated five million knife cuts per day are performed by 130 workers in the beef boning room at Midfield Meats. Its output, of around 800 cattle per day, contributes to export sales of red meat, totalling \$20 billion annually.

There has been a strong response on social media to the latest revelations about conditions in the meat industry. One person wrote on Facebook: "Nothing is news to me in this [*Age-SMH*] article. I have known these workers and their plight for years, jammed 12–15 in broken down housing. It has taken way too long for this to come to light. I have had these people in my home and they are often unwell and are too tired to cook for themselves. They are fearful of losing their jobs and letting their families down back home."

Referring to the treatment of Benson Wang, another person wrote, "This kind of demeaning treatment of your labour force reminds one of the early Victorian era, not the 21st Century."

In response, an ex-Midfield Meats worker posted, "I couldn't agree more. I used to work there from 2018-2019, then resigned because I mentally suffered from verbal abuse, shouted by my [supervisor]. I was helpless and depressed, but I didn't know who to reach out for help... We are not allowed to bring mobile phones inside the premises, so no documentations for every traumatic event."

Responsibility for the situation is shared by the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU).

Appalling working conditions are the product of

decades of concessions imposed by the AMIEU and the meat companies to drive up productivity and exploitation. The AMIEU has a long history of assisting meat processors cut meat workers' pay and conditions.

In 2013, in what became a major test case for wage-cutting, the Teys/Cargill meatworks, in the state of Queensland, issued workers an ultimatum: take pay cuts of 20 percent across the board or the plant will shut down. The AMIEU did everything it could to isolate the Teys/Cargill workers, kept them straitjacketed within the Labor government's anti-strike Fair Work laws, and cobbled together a wretched agreement with the company to enforce the cost-cutting.

The immigrant meatworkers are among the most oppressed sections of the working class. They are subjected to intensive exploitation and also to nationalist scapegoating, being falsely blamed for the growing jobs crisis, which is the result of continuous pro-business restructuring. The corporatised unions barely feign interest in the plight of these workers.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and *World Socialist Web Site* are committed to doing all in our power to expose the conditions facing meatworkers, and to fight for their political organisation. This can only take place through a break with the unions, and the development of genuine workers' organisations, including independent rank-and-file committees. We urge workers in the sector to contact us today at [sep@sep.org.au](mailto:sep@sep.org.au).



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