

## **Historical milestone: overseas Filipino workers and Australian unions**

Wednesday 28 November 2007, by [Migrante Australia](#) (Date first published: 24 November 2007).

**The following article was written by Migrante Australia, an organisation dedicated to organising and mobilising Filipino migrants and protecting their rights and welfare.**

The establishment of the Filipino Metalworkers within the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) in Western Australia — which is giving a voice to workers on temporary visas within the union — is the first of its kind in Australian unionism.

Overseas Filipino worker (OFW) members of the AMWU in the Filipino Metalworkers intend to run for positions in the union's State Council and State Conference which gives OFWs a temporary visa holder voice in the union's decision-making bodies.

Of 700 OFW metal tradespeople in Perth, the AMWU (WA) has recruited 218 in only 10 months in 31 enterprises including those within fabrication, heavy engineering, plastic manufacturing, shipbuilding and factory maintenance.

"Instead of a workplace approach during which we visit worksites to address workers' grievances, we've taken a more community-oriented approach, literally living with the community — visiting houses and their social events, even playing basketball with them", AMWU (WA) organiser Joel Asphar said.

"We've been agitating around one issue only which has been the deportation threats against the S457s [457 visa-holders]/OFWs and because we've been able to stop these deportations and the guys now know what their rights are, our campaign focus has now changed to the issue of residency for our OFW members."

On investigation of complaints received from their Australian members and from some Filipino workers, the AMWU found out that OFWs thought they had no rights at all, could not question their working conditions nor join a union and believed employers could deport S457 visa workers whenever they wished to.

The US State Department has said the Australian government's S457 visa scheme has led to sex trafficking, debt bondage and slavery of migrants in Australia — in its 2007 "Trafficking in Persons" report.

Many of the OFWs' grievances have been successfully resolved by the AMWU, winning disputes with employers and finding jobs for sacked OFWs.

"Australia has a proud tradition of migration and it is only this generation that has had to go through this temporary visa arrangement but despite this, our members will continue in their campaign to obtain permanent residency and continue this proud Australian tradition of migration", Ashpar says.

[To contact Migrante Australia, phone Butch on 0413 041 514 or Ani on 0402 941 935.]

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