



Record set straight on union vilification

Heather Ridout says the welding firm in the visa controversy has done nothing wrong

THERE is much more than meets the eye to the case of a Brisbane welding company accused last week of mistreating its Filipino workers. The case is a gross misuse of union power.

When the story broke that Dartbridge Welding in outer Brisbane was supposedly abusing about 40 staff employed on 457 visas, union officials flew north in record time. What followed from the union was a series of untruths and half truths that presented the company in the most negative light possible while giving no credit to the substantial efforts by the company's new owner to engage with the union and to address a number of union concerns.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union claimed the 457 visa workers were underpaid; charged \$175 "rent" to live in substandard housing; three workers had been sacked for being in a union; staff had been threatened with dismissal and forced to sign AWAs they had not read; and staff had been held at the workplace against their will.

To set the record straight — they were being paid at levels which met the requirements of the 457 visa program and the \$175 paid to the company's previous ownership covered much more than "rent". It also covered health insurance, all transport to and from work and between jobs in a minibus, all gas, water and electricity; accommodation in new not "basic" accommodation which was fully furnished and included a pool and other recreational facilities.

It needs to be understood the company's former welding supervisor, Dennis Hickman, took over ownership of the company only on the day the story first appeared. He undertook to do an audit of employment arrangements and has done everything he can to address the concerns put forward by the union including increasing the payments to workers.

For example, he has reduced the rent, transport and utilities charge to \$100 and the company will cover the workers' health costs on top of that amount. He has told employees they are free

to stay in housing rented by the company or move to private accommodation. When he was telling workers of this offer at a paid meeting during working hours the union threatened to call the police while outrageously suggesting the workers were held against their will.

I understand union officials have been disrupting entry to the Dartbridge workshop and refusing to pass on to the workers offers made by the company. One union claim that Hickman finds highly distressing is the suggestion that three former workers lost their jobs due to their union membership. He has been an active union member all his working life.

Another false union claim is that the AWAs under which the workers are employed are invalid. In fact, I understand the workers, with the assistance of translators, read the AWAs in full and signed them.

The Australian Industry Group, of which Dartbridge is a member, supports the 457 visa program as one of the short-term solutions to skill shortages but

has a strong view that employers should meet the pay and conditions standards required of them by the Immigration Department and that they should have a commitment to training. Employers who do the wrong thing should be prosecuted but nothing has been put forward by the union to suggest Dartbridge is such an employer.

Hickman has a long-term vision for his business as a training enterprise but he also stands by his present workforce and rejects yet another union claim that the workforce is about to be sacked.

The union's aim appears to be to demonise the new owner as part of a political campaign.

This is not the story of a "rogue" employer abusing migrant labour. It is the story of a tradesman who wanted to own his own business and found himself in the middle of an unfair union vilification campaign in pursuit of a political end.

Heather Ridout is chief executive of the Australian Industry Group