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**Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration
- Inquiry into temporary business visas**

I am a 38 year subcontractor plasterer in Darwin, Northern Territory. I am not a union member. I represent myself, local and interstate tradesmen here in Australia concerned with the 457 Visa.

My submission will reflect how the introduction and increasing number of overseas sourced cheap labour has been detrimental to the employment, job security, wages and way of life for Australians. I will also highlight the concerns I have about the exploitation of these overseas workers and the conditions under which they are employed.

My background

I grew up on a country farm in Victoria until I was six years old. My family then bought a hotel in a nearby town, which my father turned into a thriving business. I worked horses with my father from a young age to where I broke in most of my father's horses. I was lucky enough that my family believed in a good education yet was happy for me to pursue whatever work avenue I desired. Through some young and foolish decisions I ended up on the streets of Sydney where I found out life was pretty tough. I went from loading water melons to being offered a job as the youngest ever manager of AGL. I left Sydney and returned to the country where I was offered three months work in Darwin - that was 20 years ago.

In the Northern Territory I have worked in a range of industries from mining, landscaping and construction and have worked as a labourer, as a bouncer, as a furniture removalist. It was only out of luck that a friend was in need of a hand in plastering. I have worked my way up from picking up pellets on a building site to running the plasterboard side of major constructions within Darwin, ie. Gas Plant, Robertson Barracks and high rise developments.

Recent experience

In November 2006 I was working for a company that had recently expanded from painting into the construction industry. Through my reputation and contacts with past crew members, I established a strong experienced working team of local tradesmen and labourers.

The project we were working on started to run into large costs due to under quoting, bad product and poor management and soon turned the blame on the crew.

Incentive offered to recruit 457 workers in China

The company then approached another company on site who already had large numbers of overseas workers and enquired about the use of the 457 Visa. This activity was actively encouraged by the main construction company of the project.

I was offered a salary of \$80,000 and incentives such as \$100,000 plus a unit in their next project as a bonus, if I was to travel to China and recruit workers. It was arranged that an employment agency was to meet us in China and assist in finding forty plasterers and twenty painters for a fee of \$85,000 once the workers arrived in groups of fifteen to twenty in Australia.

My position with this company was something I had strived for, I was a single father in need of an income to support my daughter. No doubt the salary and incentives would have been in my favour, however I had a crew of loyal, hardworking experienced tradesmen who had my word and my reputation to trust.

Twenty-five members of this crew were about to be replaced by 457 visa workers and I made the decision not to partake in the introduction of overseas workers knowing it would also be considered as my resignation from the company.

It was never my intention to make a stand to be noticed for my own losses, I have been approached by a growing number of Australian workers from a whole range of different industries who have been effected directly or indirectly by the introduction, or for a better word 'abuse' of, the 457 visa.

I constantly hear the term 'lack of tradesmen, lack of skilled workers' . However, the 457 is a quick fix solution to a growing problem in Australia. The working class are experiencing job losses and forced wage reductions. As a result, Australian families are experiencing extreme financial strains. These same families are too scared to approach the authorities or their employers because it's these same people responsible for introducing these problems into the system.

An international construction company managed to build one of the largest developments here in Darwin using only local and interstate workers on the LNG Gas Plant yet employers apparently struggle to find workers in Darwin for high density units and water front developments.

The impact that taking a stand has had on my personal life

In the past month my life has been threatened, I have been warned and I recently have been asked to stay silent. This has affected my family home and my girlfriend is concerned for my safety. My reputation is at stake and my future in Darwin in the construction industry is also at stake.

These warnings have come from people whose only concerns are that of financial losses and their political profiles with no regard to the repercussions to the Australian workforce. This in itself has made me more determined in what I am doing and believe it is the right thing to do.

In the past month I have had media coverage in the local newspaper, television news, talk back radio stations and on national television. The media believe there is a story to be told yet the Government appears ignorant.

Within three days notice, a march of approximately 100 union and non-union workers was held in Darwin on Monday March 5th, 2007 from the Esplanade to Parliament House. At that march MLA Dave Tolner faced the crowd and laughed off accusations and reports of abuse of the 457 Visa and refuted that it was effecting the Australian workers. A government representative displayed total disrespect and disregard for these people's issues and confirmed to the public that the Government has no real concern for the Australian workers.

There is a growing unrest in the business industry over those companies who are employing large crews of low paid overseas workers as they are able to quote cheap prices enabling them to gain a monopoly over the tendering market here in Darwin.

Rates too low to attract interstate labour

Darwin enjoyed what was once called a "working holiday" for interstate tradesmen, labourers etc and their families. Local businesses such as fishing charter businesses, scenic flight operators, tour operators, motels/hotels, housing all benefited from money injected into the community by these workers. The overseas workers are here to earn money for a limited time to help their families back home and this is where their money will go.

Cost savings will not be passed on

Businesses are exploiting the 457 Visa for their own financial gains. Consumers and families will not receive cheaper products or services. The temptation will grow for companies to continue to exploit the overseas workers to gain more profits, cut more corners, overlook safety procedures and site inductions, produce sub-standard products, increase work hours and reduce the conditions of employment. They have clearly displayed it's all about the dollar at the end of the day.

Social impact of 457 visa abuse

The undercurrent in regard to the introduction of overseas replacement labour is rising. The Government has used race hatred (children overboard) for their own political gain however they have an issue here that if not controlled will cause obvious racial tension amongst different communities.

Another issue raised again recently by the Government was the stand against processing the people coming into our country by boats yet this same Government will fly overseas workers in over our heads, into our airports to take our jobs on our own soil.

Impact on apprenticeships of 457 visa scheme

Australian families are feeling a financial strain but more concerning is the future of our children. The window of opportunity for young apprentices is closing for the young of today and tomorrow. Businesses that sponsor overseas workers are no longer providing and promoting apprenticeships or similar opportunities for our young community.

My mobile is a private number yet I have been contacted from people I don't even know from across the country with concerns regarding the 457 Visa. People have found a way to reach me because they have no where else to go, their Government is selling them out, where do they go when they are losing their way of life?

I look forward to the opportunity to address the Committee on these matters.

Yours faithfully
Andrew Gibson

"You're not better than any one out there but you're as good as any one of them" - Peter John Gibson