

Gas rig workers ripped off: union

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SKILLED Filipino workers on a \$1.6 billion gas project on the North-West Shelf are being paid less than \$8 an hour, undercutting both local wage rates and the amounts promised in their contracts, the Australian Workers Union says.

The AWU's national secretary, Paul Howes, said yesterday the union had complained to the Workplace Ombudsman about the underpayment of about 40 Filipino workers on Woodside Petroleum's Angel project.

The workers were employed by one of Woodside's contractors, McDermott Industries. They were being "brought here and paid less than what an Australian 16-year-old working at a McDonald's outlet could expect", Mr Howes said.

The union's complaint will come as an embarrassment to Woodside executives, who told the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, yesterday the company would need more foreign labour for planned expansions of the giant North-West Shelf venture.

Mr Rudd visited a Woodside-operated onshore gas plant in Karratha to discuss skills shortages in the resources industry.

He said a Government objective was to plan for skills shortages or abundances in the future, and to co-ordinate the migration program with this objective.

"To be blunt, that hasn't been done in recent years and we need to fix that up," Mr Rudd told reporters in Karratha.

McDermott Industries did not respond to a request from the *Herald* to comment on the union claims. A spokesperson for Woodside said the company expected its contractors to meet their full obligations in respect of employment of foreign workers.

Mr Howes said the Filipino workers had been promised \$21 an hour by McDermott, which was part of a Texan multinational engineering firm.

"While this \$21 an hour pay rate is well below Australian rates in the industry, we have got the evidence that some of these workers are actually being paid less than \$8 an hour," he said. "Australians at the same skill level could expect an annual wage package of more than \$115,000."

The need to import workers "should not be used as an opportunity to rip off workers from our Asian neighbourhood", he said. "Community acceptance of a foreign worker program can only be maintained if there is confidence that the legitimate need for massively increased numbers of skilled workers is not being used as part of a scheme to undermine Australian living standards and to keep Asian workers on slave-like wage structures."

The union says it has copies of pay slips showing the wages paid into the employees' accounts represent less than \$8 an hour.

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