

Union claims skilled overseas workforce on booming North-West Shelf project is paid less than fast-food junior staff

Migrant workers in '\$8 rip-off'

KIM MACDONALD

The Workplace Ombudsman will investigate union allegations that an oil and gas company on Woodside's North-West Shelf project is ripping off migrant workers by paying them less than fast-food workers.

The Australian Workers Union has accused McDermott International, a Texas-based multinational which trades as McDermott Industries in Perth, of paying Filipino construction workers only \$8 an hour to build barges on the Angel Project.

AWU national secretary Paul Howes said migrants' contracts paid an hourly rate of \$21 and a base salary of \$41,850, well below the \$115,000 paid to locals on the same job.

But he claimed the union had evidence that at least one migrant worker was paid \$US7 (\$8) an hour.

Mr Howes suspected that up to 40 Filipino workers on the project were being exploited by the low wages.

"This is just so morally wrong. This is not some two-bit operator but a wealthy resource company contracted to Woodside during a resources boom," Mr Howes said. "Skilled workers from the Philippines are being brought here and paid less than what an Australian 16-year-old at a McDonald's outlet could expect."

Mr Howes said the exploitation would add to public cynicism about the guest worker program.

It is believed the workers are on a 456 visa, a short-stay visa similar to the controversial 457 visa.

Woodside North-West Shelf Venture spokeswoman Michelle Manook said the mining giant would investigate the matter. "We would expect our contractors to ensure they meet their full obligations with respect to foreign workers working on Australian projects," she said.

The Workplace Ombudsman Nick Wilson the allegations were concern-

ing and would be investigated as a matter of urgency. "We are taking these allegations extremely seriously and are investigating them as a matter of urgency," Mr Wilson said. "Workplace inspectors from our Perth and Melbourne offices have made preliminary inquiries with the union and McDermott Industries."

A spokesman for Immigration Minister Chris Evans said the Minister had directed the Immigration Department to work with the Ombudsman. "The Government recognises that we need a skilled migration program to meet the demands of a booming economy," the spokesman said. "Claims that foreign workers are being underpaid undermine confidence in the program so it is vital that we improve the integrity of the system."

McDermott Industries did not return calls.