

# A long way to come for a job



While the debate over working visas and imported labor continues, 9000 migrant workers are quietly doing their jobs around the state. What lives do they lead and what impact do they have on the regional communities they join?  
SHANE MAGUIRE and  
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investigate.

**S**HIQING Dong is doing a job very few Australians want. He's happy in his work and his employer is happy to have him there. It seems a clear win-win situation and completely at odds with the undercurrent of mistrust and cynicism that exists towards the 457 visa system used to employ him. "I came here for a challenge and my dream is to become an Australian," the Murray Bridge slaughterman says of his quest to make a better life for himself than the one he had in China.

"The work is good. We work hard. It is a good life here in Murray Bridge," Dong says.

Murray Bridge is just one of many towns around South Australia that have become home to thousands of workers brought in on 457 visas to fill employment gaps.

The visas, valid for four years, allow employers to recruit from overseas people who are skilled in various fields, from medicine to meat works, to fill labour shortages.

They are blending into towns like Naracoorte, Berri, Mt Gambier, parts of the Barossa Valley, Murray Bridge and even remote regions such as Moomba.

SA runs only second to Victoria in the number of migrant workers brought in, with the figure at about 9000.

At Murray Bridge, the work is at the local abattoir, which faces a constant struggle to find and keep staff for what is an unattractive occupation. Chinese workers make up the bulk of slaughtermen on 457 visas, with 97 already employed at Murray Bridge.

There are also another 100 humanitarian refugees, from places such as Sudan, Somalia and Afghanistan, working at the facility.

The presence of the Chinese workers, in particular, has created suspicion among unions. The Meat Industry Workers Union has been engaged in an ongoing war of words with T and R Pastoral management, the state's largest abattoir, over claims the workers have taken jobs from locals.

But Brian Devey, the group human resources manager at T and R, is bemused by these claims.

In the past, he has challenged unions to provide as many as 155 workers to fill positions, without success.

"My phone hasn't rung yet," he says.

He says the company is very happy with the work ethic of 457 visa workers and humanitarian refugees.

"We have tried to recruit local labour without success because we have an expectation of 5000 extra jobs over the next few years but we just can't find people. Right now we have 850 working but everyday we work 155 short so if anyone wants a job, there is one here. I am afraid to say it, but some people just don't want to work."

Devey says that on average the company starts about 80 Australians a month, with 60 of them quitting "anywhere between three hours and 28 days from starting".

"The cost involved in starting those people, for advertising, medicals, vaccinations and induction is about \$5000 a person," he says.

"If we lose 60 a month because they simply don't like the job, that is a lot of money down the drain. Rumours that the Chinese are underpaid are laughable. We pay the \$59,000 level under the Immigration Act but they do earn a lot more depending on their hours and skills. We have been audited by both state and federal government agencies six times and no concerns of wages have surfaced."

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Graham Smith, state secretary of the Meat Industry Employees Union says he has concerns about all 457 visa workers, not just those at T and R Murray Bridge.

"In the last 12 months we have had a range of issues with a number of companies with 457 visa workers," he says.

"We have found they are doing work other than what they are supposed to be doing and this has the flow on of cutting short career paths for local workers.

"This is happening not just at T and R but across the board.

"Because the meat industry is largely a seasonal industry and locals walk in off the street so to speak, they start at the bottom but soon learn of better paid jobs available.

"But the problem is, we believe, visa workers are going straight into those jobs which translates to locals having less career opportunities."

Devey says T and R Pastoral is arranging for 75 wives and children of workers to come to Murray Bridge so they can resume family life.

“Community organisations such as Rotary and churches are heavily involved in helping these people when they get here,” he says.

The company rents housing from local agents and then furnishes it for the workers to move into and they then pay \$75 a week rent.

“They like the town and it seems the town likes them,” Devey says.

Some people within the Murray Bridge community are hostile to the Chinese but locals point out that those same people are hostile to anyone who is different and are dismissed as racist rednecks.

If such racism does exist, it certainly hasn't stopped the abattoir workers fitting into the town's culture.

“It's more than obvious they enjoy the town. It must be the space they appreciate,” says Mick O'Neil, owner of Mensland clothing store.

“Talk that they don't mix is just stupid. They shop at Coles, they have functions, in fact a friend of mine was invited to one recently and she thought it was a great celebration.

“It was a Chinese festive thing, tonnes of food and they were all so happy. Now that their English is getting better, I think they are feeling more at home.”

The Chinese have started pouring substantial amounts of money into the economy at Murray Bridge. When they first arrived, they bought up just about every bicycle in town to ride to

work. Now, a year later, those same workers are putting pressure on the local used car market, with many buying early and late-model Holdens and Fords.

On any day, the Chinese workers gather along the banks of the Murray to catch fish, even the hated European carp, which, according to locals, they have a special way of preparing.

As well, the Chinese workers have introduced a couple of elements from their culture into Murray Bridge. Last year they celebrated Chinese New Year with locals, along with two other cultural festivals.

When they arrived last year, the town officially welcomed the workers with a community event where more than 500 people turned out to say “G'day”.

“The staff from overseas working at T and R, our biggest employer, are working out very well,” Murray Bridge City Council CEO David Altman says.

“They are integrating very well into the community and the locals have embraced them. I believe they are making a valuable contribution here.”

The Chinese workers are oblivious to any negativity which might be generated by some.

Married couple Konglong Chen, 40, and his wife, Yunping Zheng, 40, want to become Australian citizens.

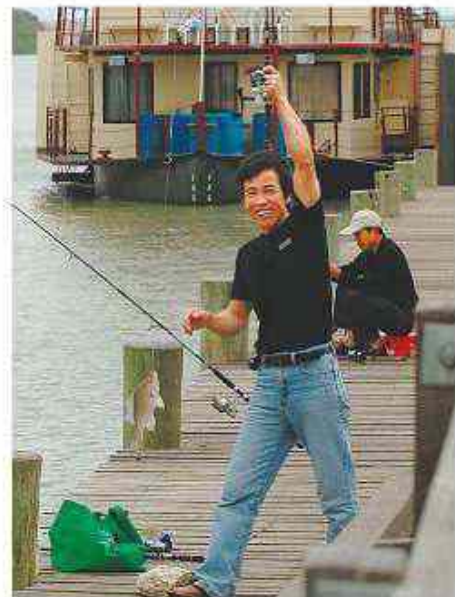
“I am working with good people and here we have better opportunities than in China,” Chen says through an interpreter.

“I was a slaughterman in China and I have 10 years experience and certificates so we decided to come here and seek a better life.

“The language is difficult but people here in Murray Bridge are friendly and helpful.”

Yudong Zhi has worked in Murray Bridge for just over a year and loves the lifestyle, although he does miss his wife. “I am very lucky and very happy but I do miss my wife but she will be coming soon,” he says.

“I am happy in the community. I was fishing early today and the locals are trying to teach me to play golf. Sometimes you see racism, but maybe through misunderstanding. Most of the time I don't know what they are saying.”



# 39,000 to help skills shortage

■ More than 39,000 foreign workers are living and working in Australia under the controversial 457 visa scheme. The visas allow employers to top-up their work force with skilled and non-skilled workers from countries such as the UK, India, the Philippines, China, the U.S., South Africa and a dozen more regions.

■ Immigrants can be employed by sponsors for up to four years but if the job they have taken becomes redundant, they must return to their home country.

It is a system whole-heartedly endorsed by the Federal Government and, in particular, by the former Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Senator Amanda Vanstone.

■ A total of 39,530 457 visas were issued in 2005-2006, a rise from 27,350 the previous year.

The newcomers work in a variety of jobs, from doctors and other health care workers, engineering in the mining and petroleum fields, to

linesmen for ETSA.

Many are also employed in what has become a controversial area, that of slaughter person in abattoirs, amid claims they are taking away local jobs.

The Federal Government has strict guidelines to ensure that visa workers are employed under proper conditions and earn correct wages.

■ Imported workers must be paid at least the minimum salary for their position, as determined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Their contracts cannot include packages, which must be kept separate.

But unions claim that not only do the imports take jobs from Australians, they are also subject to sub-standard work and pay conditions.

■ Unions, such as the Meat Industry Employees Union, also have accused the Federal Government of trying to legitimise "rorts" in the visa system.

■ The Australian Workers Union claims 457 visa workers employed at the Santos Moomba plant are paid nearly half that of what Australian workers are paid.

Wayne Hanson, state secretary of the AWU, says that immigrant workers are employed at Moomba in remote areas where other workers rarely see them.

"Drilling contractors looking for oil and gas are all over the place," he says. "The 457 people are exposed to harsh conditions; they are at the end of the line."

■ Hanson claims that Filipino workers are being paid around \$60,000 a year to work in inhospitable conditions where temperatures are extreme while an Australian in the same position would be paid \$115,000.

"Because we don't know what their contracts state, they could be working seven days a week for all we know," Hanson says.

**Shane Maguire**



Valued ... Murray Bridge Council CEO David Altman.



Welcoming ... Murray Bridge clothing store owner Mick O'Neil: "They are feeling more at home."