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Skills shortage claims must be independently investigated before Aussie jobs offshored: unions

Plans by Australian mining and construction companies to embark on an overseas recruitment drive with Australian Government support are premature and a process must be established for thorough market testing of the skilled labour requirements of the resources sector, say unions.

ACTU President Ged Kearney said there had been no independent evidence to back up claims by mining magnates like Gina Rinehart that there weren't enough Australian workers to meet the needs of future resources projects.

She said without an independent jobs board that advertised all vacant positions on major resource projects to rigorously market test the labour requirements of mining, suspicions would remain this was simply a ploy to import cheaper, short-term workers.

"Australian workers across the nation deserve the opportunity to benefit from the resources boom, which will provide a massive jobs boon in coming years," Ms Kearney said. "While resources states such as Western Australia have very low unemployment, workers across the rest of the country are facing increasing rates of insecure work. In fact, the latest ABS figures show that employment in the construction industry is actually falling."

Ms Kearney said unions were not opposed to today's announcement of an agreement to better match unemployed skilled American workers with genuine, temporary skill shortages in the Australian resources sector. This is based on an understanding that the initiative is confined to licensed trades only, operates only in the resources construction sector, and the ACTU and unions will be fully consulted in the implementation of the initiative.

"However, the fundamental difficulty with an initiative like this is that there is still no requirement for labour market testing under current 457 visa program settings," Ms Kearney said.

"This means there is no way unions, government, or the wider community can be confident that employers have made every effort to provide job and training opportunities to Australians before resorting to the use of overseas labour – whether from the US or any other country.

"To help rectify this, we call on the Government to immediately implement the commitment made at last year's Labor Party conference to establish a national Jobs Board for the resources sector. This would be a simple, low-cost, practical measure to ensure that Australian employers are making every effort to employ locally.

"There also need to be far more stringent training obligations on employers using 457 visa labour. Currently, the Government has no idea if employers using overseas labour are making any effort to train Australian apprentices.

"Australia's wealthiest person, Gina Rinehart, is very keen to fly workers to the remote north-west for her iron ore projects, under the guise of giving them a better life, yet she has no independent evidence that this is the case, or that Australian workers cannot do the work in the first place.

"At the same time, there remain outstanding allegations that many workers flown to Australia on 457 visas are being underpaid and are doing very different work to what their employers claimed."

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