

PORT JOBS SOLD OUT

Union Slams foreign crew

ILLAWARRA jobs are being sold out by a Canadian shipping company hiring half-price foreign labour on temporary visas, according to a maritime union.

At the centre of the claims is the Iron Chieftain which transports iron and coal to and from Port Kembla. The vessel is owned by Canadian Steamship Lines (CSL), which has been hiring foreign crew on temporary visas since October 2006, according to the union. Two Ukrainians and a Mauritian have been employed as engineers.

Foreign crew prompts union anger

"CSL parachutes in these foreigners and pays them substandard wages - that's their practice all around the world," Australian Institute of Maritime and Power Engineers (AIMPE) state secretary Andrew Williamson said yesterday.

Australian workers were being shut out of jobs by foreigners prepared to work for less, he said.

"Local workers get priced out and Australians get displaced from their own coastal shipping trade."

A spokesman for CSL declined to comment.

Mr Williamson said CSL had justified its hiring policy by claiming the foreigners were paid according to the state award. "But ... the state award is about 50 per cent of what you get under the enterprise agreement," he said.

"Unsurprisingly, these guys from overseas aren't union members. They don't pay Australian income tax."

Mr Williamson said Temporary Resident 457 visas were too easily approved, and were being abused.

"If companies want to bring someone in on a 457 visa, they're supposed to demonstrate a shortage in the local labour market. For one ship, we don't see how there's sufficient shortage."

Wollongong-based Liberal Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells defended CSL's hiring of the three internationals.

"There's a shortage of Australian seafarers to crew ships, and this company is simply filling that shortage. It's not as though they're trying to replace the entire crew," she said.

"It's chicken-and-the-egg stuff - if you don't have the people with expertise in the ranks, then employers will need to look overseas ..."

Sen Fierravanti-Wells also suggested the AIMPE position on 457 visas was politically motivated.

"... the biggest users of the 457 visas are the state Labor governments," she said.

South Coast Labour Council secretary Arthur Rorris said the area's skills shortage would be exacerbated by short-sighted employers hiring overseas to cut costs.