



**HUMAN TRAFFICKING WORKING GROUP**

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**NEWS REPORT**

<b>Headline</b>	Labour middleman case
<b>Reported in</b>	<i>The Age</i>
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THE Immigration Department is poised to close in on a major labour-hire contractor operating illegally in the agriculture industry and refer a case against him to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Department investigators have been collecting evidence against the man, whose main base is regional Victoria, since last year.

If the DPP takes up the case and is successful, it will be the first time a labour-hire contractor has been prosecuted under legislation introduced two years ago to prevent exploitation of illegal workers.

"We are hoping to present a case as soon as possible," the spokesman said.

The contractors, also known as middlemen, supply labour as needed to farmers for fruit picking or harvesting and payment is made through them, not directly to workers.

The man being investigated has been operating a labour-hire pool in several states. Among them are workers illegally in Australia after their short-term visas have expired or those on visas that do not allow them to work, a department spokesman said. They include workers from Malaysia and China.

Also under investigation is the "smuggling" into Australia of workers with false identities and using forged documents, or "labour trafficking" involving workers on tourists visas making false refugee claims to prolong their stays.

Confirmation of the department's investigation follows an article in *The Age* last Saturday that highlighted scams under which an underground network of labour agents is procuring illegal workers in Asia and India to supply a black market for labour in Australia.

Cesar Melhem, Victorian secretary of the Australian Workers Union, welcomed the prosecution move. "It is about time the Government enforced its own legislation," he said, adding that criminal charges should be laid.

"There is not much difference from 18th-century slavery and an example should be made of these people."

There were a number of well organised contractors with portable workforces of up to 100 workers in Victoria, preying on illegal migrants who worked under poor conditions for cash and were charged exorbitant rent for rundown housing. So far the Government had just been giving them warnings, he said.

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