

**FLY IN, FLY OUT WORKERS — HEALTH AND WELLBEING — DRAFT CODE OF PRACTICE**

*Grievance*

**MS J. FARRER (Kimberley)** [9.25 am]: I rise to speak on a matter that has been raised with me by many people in the Kimberley and is important to many in our state—the ongoing loss to suicide of Western Australians in the mining industry. Western Australian men and women working in this industry were on the front lines of the resources boom that helped Australia get through the global financial crisis without a recession. We are all lucky to have been rewarded for their hard work that helped make Australia the strong and successful economy we are today. I am bringing forward this grievance because I believe that those Western Australians supported this state and country and the mining companies when we needed them most. However, when that need was no longer required, they felt that they were discarded, and perhaps it is no wonder some have lost respect for or loyalty to an industry that they feel showed them none.

A fly in, fly out worker shared these words with me, and I quote —

There is a sense of confusion in the upper levels of management as to why we do not trust them at their word and do not show them the respect and loyalty they believe they deserve. Their belief is that loyalty and respect comes as part of the dollar figure they pay for our service. What they don't understand is that respect and loyalty cannot be bought, it is earned.

A local Aboriginal man has also told me that he developed depression and anxiety, for the first time in his life, at the age of 36, because of the way the bosses were treating him because he had injured his back. They cut off his pay and declined salary continuance. He has a mortgage, and five children and a wife to support, and felt he had failed his family. He felt useless and felt that the company did not believe him. His wife supported him. I believe that if she had not been there, there may have been a devastating outcome. Her primary concern was her husband. The multibillion-dollar mining company led him on for almost a year and failed to support him, despite the ongoing advice of both the company's doctor and his doctor. He was sacked recently due to ill health on the advice of the company's doctor, despite his doctor having cleared him for work the day before. The company also played the trick of pretending to offer redeployment. The company's doctor said he was unfit for his fixed plant operator role and FIFO. But, guess what? He was qualified for the fixed plant operator role, and all the jobs were FIFO except one, which would require relocating to Paraburdoo in the Pilbara, but that was a fixed plant operator role that, of course, he was not fit to perform. He was also due for long service leave in a month, but he was not paid that leave. They are now facing losing their house. It is a joke. We cannot believe the company's flashy advertising of supporting families, supporting Indigenous employees and supporting communities. It is a disgrace.

Another Aboriginal employee at the same company, working at a different site in the Pilbara, has advised me that he injured himself at work. He did not claim workers' compensation at the time because he felt he needed to support the company and work as they were short of workers. He now requires surgery, and the company is unable to locate his notes about his injury. He is unable to afford surgery. The company has also cut off his pay and declined salary continuance. He has a mortgage and responsibilities, like all of us. His surgeon has cleared him to work until he has the surgery, but the company's doctor has advised this huge company not to let him back on site.

It is true that workers in this industry earn large sums of money to provide a service. However, what we do not consider is that the personal cost and sacrifices of working in these mines far outweigh the dollar figure provided to the workers. Their larger-than-average earnings do not make them any less deserving of our help when they are suffering. It takes a lot of strength and endurance to work the long hours in the environments of these remote mine sites. This is compounded by their extended periods away from family, friends and loved ones, sometimes for up to four weeks at a time.

We also need to consider the families left at home, how they lack support and feel as lonely as their loved one onsite. Children miss their fathers and mothers who work away. I am sure that the parents miss out on watching the beauty of their children growing up. I am sure that members have all heard the stories of how these workers live like kings in their mining camps with buffet food, resort-style facilities, individual rooms with Foxtel and free wi-fi. The picture that has been painted for me by mineworkers does not match those stories that we have been told. Instead, what is drawn are pictures of dial-up, slow wi-fi, or no wi-fi at all; limited cell reception; run-down camps; hot-bedding; curfews on socialising; and a feeling that their management places production and profit above worker safety and happiness. Consider how these conditions would limit a worker's ability to contact family, friends and loved ones and to seek support from them, to develop and maintain romantic relationships and to provide a caring and loving relationship for their children.

One factor alleviates some of the stress felt from the conditions I have stated, and it speaks to the Australian spirit—the camaraderie of mateship. What supports workers in these environments is their mates. Working

together in such conditions, it is not surprising that workers would turn to each other for support. Who else would understand their plight? Words can convey only so much to family and friends; one must experience the conditions to understand them. Working away from home for long periods prevents these workers from taking part in much of what makes many of us happy, such as community events and team sports and catching up with mates for a casual beer and a chat. These workers turn to their onsite mates for that social interaction and support we all require. I understand well the need to manage alcohol consumption for occupational health and safety reasons, but I have been informed that workers are having, in their view, unnecessary curfews enforced on them that prevent them from socialising and gathering after a certain hour.

The more I hear, the more concerned I am that the loss of some of the basic freedoms that we take for granted in our lives is having a great impact on FIFO workers. It is not difficult to see how these workers suffer mental health issues and stress from the long periods spent in these environments. These men and women should not be criticised or chastised for doing what we all seek in our daily lives—trying to find support through socialising with peers and friends. I would suggest to the mining industry that there are better ways to engage their workforce. It should provide them with an opportunity to be a part of something bigger than themselves and encourage them.

**MR W.J. JOHNSTON (Cannington — Minister for Mines and Petroleum)** [9.32 am]: I appreciate the member for Kimberley raising these issues. I know that she is a great advocate for the residents in the Kimberley and a leader in the Indigenous community. I respect greatly that she has raised this grievance. Firstly, I want to touch briefly on the question of workers' compensation and then I will turn to fly in, fly out workers.

I am very happy to have my office speak to the member separately about those specific cases that she raised, to see whether something can be done. It may well be that something cannot be done, because they may be too far in the past. I want to emphasise, for the benefit of all in the community, two very important issues regarding workers' compensation. The first is that people must make a claim when they are eligible to do so. I know that some people and even employers encourage people not to make a claim on the basis that employers sometimes say that they will look after them anyway. However, let me make it clear that the Workers' Compensation and Injury Management Act provides a range of regulatory functions that are about not only holding an employer to account, but also how the process is managed. If someone does not make a claim, they do not get access to those regulatory activities. It is quite important from the perspective of both an employer and an employee that a claim is made or at least a record properly kept so that a claim can be made at a later date.

The second issue is medical advice. An employer or insurance company doctor cannot specify treatment. All they can do is make recommendations. The treatment of a case must always be done by the employee's personal doctor because it is a fundamental right of all people in Australia to have the medical services they choose. Although company or insurance doctors are rightly given powers to review cases, they cannot specify treatment. They can specify their view about what treatment is required, but, at the end of the day, the treatment needs to be managed between the person and their doctor.

I want to talk about the equally important issue of fly in, fly out arrangements for workers. We all know that FIFO work, as we all call it, is a large part of work in Western Australia. Indeed, workers fly in and out of the Pilbara from a range of locations in the Kimberley. FIFO work does not happen just out of the south west of the state. We all remember that in the previous Parliament, the Economics and Industry Standing Committee, chaired by Graham Jacobs, reviewed FIFO work arrangements and made a whole series of recommendations. Unfortunately, the former government in the previous Parliament did not respond to that report. That was very disappointing. When I became minister, one of the first actions I did was to require the creation of a FIFO code of practice, which was the principal recommendation arising from that report. We have now had two rounds of the draft code. The first was issued in February this year and the second one in August. I have allowed the agency a bit longer to finalise the code. Some people are disappointed that I have extended the time, but as the code has attracted broad interest, I want to make sure that everybody's points of view are taken into account before I make the decision about the final terms, because, as I understand, I am the approving authority for the code and I will ensure that it is satisfactory. Also, I note the work being done by the Mental Health Commission. I understand that the Minister for Mental Health will make some announcements quite soon about the findings of a project on FIFO workers' mental health and wellbeing.

One of the issues that the member for Kimberley raised and that is talked about in the report is the question of access to Skype and other modern communications technologies. In some areas, that is considered controversial. To me, it seems pretty commonsense. We know that in Western Australia, unfortunately, we have a higher suicide rate than in the rest of Australia. We have 15 suicides per 100 000 compared with the balance of Australia at six per 100 000. I am not saying that FIFO is the cause of that difference, but it is interesting that we have that higher rate and we have a larger FIFO workforce in Western Australia than in other states. I am not an epidemiologist or any other such researcher, but I note that and I think we can do more through the FIFO code of practice. The code aims to provide advice to companies about what the environment looks like to provide for good

health and wellbeing, including mental health wellbeing; suggestions about risk management processes to avoid or minimise harm; strategies for responding to issues that arise, including work-related stress, exposure to psychological hazards and other risk factors; and providing an environment that supports recovery. This code is a great opportunity for the resources sector, but also other industries, to look at these suggestions and to make sure that we have an environment that is more conducive to mental health and mental wellbeing in these work camps and at workplaces.

One of the sad duties of my chief of staff is to receive the phone calls from the departmental officials whenever there is a death in a workplace. My chief of staff does not like getting a phone call from an agency on the weekend because it usually means there has been a further death in Western Australia. We are very, very concerned to work with the community, industry and employees to make sure that we have a better outcome for mental health problems in FIFO work practices. I hope that the code of practice will be a significant step forward in that process.