

ALCOA — ENTERPRISE BARGAINING AGREEMENT

Statement

HON TIM CLIFFORD (East Metropolitan) [5.31 pm]: I rise tonight to make a couple of brief remarks about Hon Adele Farina’s motion on Alcoa workers and to highlight a couple of my experiences when I was working in the construction field in my younger years before I found myself in this place. In the early 2000s, like many young people in WA, I moved from the country to the metro area. I found myself without work and because I did not have many choices I took up work through an agency that led me into the profession of plastic welding and construction. In that field the work ranged from dogging and rigging to concrete work or just working on the shovel and with machinery on subdivisions around Perth. But at Alcoa I worked on the caustic ponds, which is where all the terrible sludge, the by-product from the refining processes, is stored. Conditions were very poor throughout my time and experiences on that site. We were forced to work in atrocious conditions, in the extreme heat and under a lot of pressure. That was due not only to the work we were doing, but also the company I was working for. The company was always pushing us to the edge of workplace safety and conditions. On more than one occasion we found ourselves on strike because a fellow worker would have highlighted the fact that one of our allowances had not been paid from a previous week. There were constant pitched battles between workers and the employer. We had no union protection. In fact, if the company discovered that someone was in a union, they were quickly singled out. For example, if they lived in Baldivis, they would be made to drive all the way to work in Joondalup, or, for some unknown reason, all of a sudden that person would be forced to drive an hour and a half to work from where they lived. If the company found out that that person owned a house and was under a lot of mortgage stress, they would be put into a position, even if it was amenable to their skills, that would ensure that they had to choose between working under terrible conditions or leaving the job. This occurred weekly for many workers during that time.

As the mining boom kicked off, I found myself on the Ravensthorpe nickel project. When it shut down, I remember a lot of the remarks made by people in this place about the workers who found themselves without a job. I have to say that after spending two and a half years on the construction phase of that job, leading up to the closure of the mine site, we were told that our jobs were safe. I had a lot of friends move from Perth to the Ravensthorpe area. They bought property and they were told that they would have years of work in that place. Even the public relations person that BHP had in the community was telling the community that there was years and years of work there. This was up until the eve of the mine shutting down. What did BHP do then? BHP flew down a whole bunch of security workers the night before the mine was to be shut down because there were fears there would be a riot. We were pulled into the mess hall—I think there were over 1 000 workers—and they said, “Sorry, you do not have a job. You are out of work.” The audible gasp in the room was horrendous; members should have heard the people. Some of these people were in dismay because they had just signed mortgages in the area. My regional counterparts in this place might have had friends or relations who worked on that site at one stage of their lives. All of a sudden, all these people were out of a job. BHP turned around and said that it was sorry, but the nickel price had fallen through the floor and it had no choice but to sack us all. If a company is going to get to the point of sacking that many people, why the hell did it not give any more notice? Why did it not soften the blow? Why did it not ask these people whether they were okay? A lot of these people, like me, found themselves having to work in jobs all over this state. I had a mortgage at the time. I was told that I had months and years of work in that place. Naturally, if a young person in this state is told that over a year or two by their employer, they believe them. I believed what the officials from BHP said and I made commitments. I looked to the future. I thought I was going to be paid and would be able to provide for my family and survive until the end of my fly in, fly out experience.

Leading on from my pretty horrendous experience at the Ravensthorpe nickel project, I found myself on the Boddington project, which I found to be another level altogether. At that time it was after the global financial crisis and a lot of companies were closing. They found the revenue streams drying up, so they used it as an excuse, even though we knew there was metro work and other projects on the go. A lot of these employers just cut and run. I found myself working for another employer in Boddington and we worked rolling day fortnights. That means that I worked three months with one day off every fortnight. If I said that I needed two or three days off, my employer would tell me, “Sorry, you’re not coming back.” My employer knew I had a mortgage. That is an experience that thousands of workers across the state have, and it is exactly what I experienced.

I then moved from Boddington and was lucky enough to get a job in Port Hedland with the port authority and we were reclaiming the mangrove area, which is another terrible job, I have to say. We were concreting on the foreshore and all that sort of stuff. A new project manager came and we found ourselves rocking up to the toolbox meeting on Monday morning. We were at the detention centre in Port Hedland and our employer had told us that it would pay us an extra allowance for staying there, because the accommodation was not the greatest place. Anyway, we were not paid our allowances for the day we had off and we were told at the meeting that we would not get paid that allowance because it was our day off. We said that we were still staying in that pretty horrendous accommodation across the road and asked what the deal was. The employer said, “No, too bad”, so we went on

strike. We had no union protection. This was at another BHP site and we could see management in the distance watching us. We were standing out there at the toolbox meeting. All the machines had stopped. I had a friend in the office who is an engineer and I had 20 of my workmates. He was messaging me from the office and telling me that they—meaning the engineers and the owner of the company, who happened to be a big Liberal Party donor—were starting to get worried. We were told not to break, because if we did, they would win. So we held our ground and we got our back pay but we were getting threats; they were calling us effing Cs, all these kinds of words. They said, “We’re going to bus you back to Perth. We’re going to put you on a bus back to Perth and we know all you guys have mortgages and families. What are you going to tell your family? You’re going to risk your job over \$60 or \$70 a day?” We said, “Yeah, we are. We are going to do that. We are going to risk our jobs, because it’s the right thing to do.” Unfortunately, the company continued to do what it did. Leading on from that, it lost a lot of good workers, the production of the company went down, and it lost a lot of contracts in the process. During that time it also used workplace agreements as a tool to do the same thing.

I fully support the earlier motion, from personal experience. I stand with the workers at the Alcoa plants, and I hope they and their families get a good outcome.