

Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, Construction and General Division, WA Divisional Branch

**Submission to the Education and Health Standing
Committee of the Western Australian Legislative
Assembly inquiry into the mental health impacts
of FIFO work arrangements**

2014



Foreword

I write regarding the inquiry entitled *Inquiry into mental health impacts of FIFO work arrangements (the Inquiry)* that received unanimous support in the Western Australian Parliament on 20 August 2014. The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, Construction and General Division, WA Divisional Branch (**CFMEU**) is the principal union representing workers and their industrial interests in the construction industry in Western Australia, including thousands of workers that are required to fly-in fly-out (FIFO) for their employment. Although the CFMEU is comprised of three divisions at a national level, namely the Mining and Energy Division, the Forestry and Furnishing Products Division and the Construction and General Division, this submission will focus on FIFO practices for construction workers in Western Australia.

The CFMEU is extremely concerned about the impact of FIFO employment on workers and their families. With the rapid growth of the resource economy, particularly in Western Australia, it is increasingly the case that our members have no other option than to pursue employment through FIFO. FIFO employment has increased significantly in Western Australia since the 1980's and the CFMEU has made it a key priority to scrutinise FIFO practices as a part of advancing and representing our members' interests in Western Australia.

This submission will provide an illustration of our observations of the current FIFO practices in Western Australia by drawing on our extensive experience of FIFO throughout the State. For the purpose of this submission, the CFMEU will summarise our concerns on the following threshold issues:

- The FIFO Experience and Mental Health;
- The role of the Federal and State governments; and
- FIFO in the future and the need for change.

Finally, this submission will make a number of recommendations to address key areas of concern with existing FIFO practices in Western Australia for the benefit of an increasingly large portion of the CFMEU's membership that FIFO for their employment. In the lead up to this inquiry the CFMEU consulted our members in the form of a short collaborative survey, namely the WA Unions survey. This survey will be referenced throughout this submission. This inquiry is of critical importance to our members, their families and the broader Western Australian community and I encourage the Committee to give careful consideration to our submission. The CFMEU thanks the Committee for the opportunity to provide input into this important inquiry.

Yours faithfully



Mick Buchan
WA State Secretary

Background

In Western Australia, the resource boom and associated construction work has paved the way for workplace arrangements that differ substantially from the normal practice of travelling to and from work daily. This employment category is commonly referred to as FIFO although some long distance commute employees drive-in and drive-out (DIDO) or bus-in and bus-out (BIBO). Throughout this submission, we will utilise the term FIFO to typify the workplace arrangements that require an employee to spend longer periods of time away from their home, family and social networks, travelling periodically between a temporary residence (such as a camp) and their home. To elaborate, for a construction worker in Western Australia, this long distance commute is typified by travel to a project for 28 days and return home for 7 days with two of those days spent travelling (this will be discussed in further detail later in the submission). This long distance commute continues until the construction phase of the project is complete. For mining workers it does not come to an end.

In Western Australia, large scale FIFO operations are still a relatively new phenomenon. Historically, the development of mines in remote regions saw the construction and establishment of towns in the 1960's and 1970's throughout the North West of WA.¹ According to Storey, FIFO practices emerged following the establishment of FIFO operations in the Gulf of Mexico where workers were unable to reside in close proximity to oil rigs.² The FIFO regime did not emerge immediately in Australia; however resource companies started to favour this work practice as a mechanism to meet labour requirements under the premise that this practice allowed workers to focus on the project and it proved to be a more cost effective system of addressing labour shortages.³ Since its establishment in Western Australia FIFO practices have increased significantly in line with the resource boom and FIFO emerged as a common employment type in Western Australia.

Today, FIFO employment is more than a form of employment; it encapsulates a lifestyle that brings with it a unique set of challenges for the worker, their family and the community at large. This is particularly relevant in Western Australia where it is expected that there will be approximately 63,500 FIFO employees by 2015.⁴ The impact of the FIFO lifestyle is not limited to the FIFO worker, but also extends to their family and social circle, which comprises and infiltrates a significant portion of the Western Australian community.

Based on current trends, companies will continue to give preference to large scale FIFO operations throughout Western Australia. According to Storey, a survey by the Department of Mines and Petroleum illustrated 5 reasons for employing a FIFO workforce.

¹ Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, *Submission 133*, page 12

² Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, *Submission 133*, page 12

³ Chamber of Minerals and Energy, *Submission 99*, page 8

⁴ Lifeline WA Report *FIFO/DIDO Mental Health*

Research Report 2013 accessed via

<http://www.lifelinewa.org.au/download/FIFO+DIDO+Mental+Health+Research+Report+2013.pdf>,

'page 14

The reasons included:

- Isolation
- Short Life of the Project
- Structural change in the industry
- Search for qualified labour
- Taxation⁵

This submission will not focus on the merits of local employment versus FIFO employment; the CFMEU views this inquiry as an opportunity to review FIFO practices as they are currently operating in Western Australia and recommend practical improvements for the benefit of our members, FIFO workers more broadly and their families.

It is important to acknowledge from the outset that the CFMEU is concerned that there is currently little regulation or parameters placed on companies utilising FIFO practices in Western Australia. For FIFO to be utilised in a successful and beneficial manner, it requires a strong focus on prioritising the health and safety of workers. Currently companies are largely left to self regulate FIFO practices. The incentive to do this appropriately, often conflicts with their interest in focusing on profit margins and project completion dates. The CFMEU is of the view that there is a genuine need to implement more stringent regulation of FIFO arrangements in Western Australia.

⁵ Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, *Submission 133*, page 12

The FIFO Experience and Mental Health

The CFMEU is extremely concerned about the impact of existing FIFO practices on the mental health and wellbeing of workers. To date, there has been little research undertaken into specific areas of FIFO arrangements. Much of the existing literature has a particular focus rather than taking a comprehensive or systemic approach. Notwithstanding this, there is some evidence that there are negative health impacts associated with FIFO work, some of which directly relate to the social isolation of the FIFO experience.

In this submission, the CFMEU will outline our observations of the current FIFO regime and its efficacy in Western Australia. The CFMEU is aware of numerous cases that epitomise the challenges associated with FIFO practices in Western Australia through its representation of workers that undertake FIFO arrangements for their employment. While it is difficult to make generalisations around the characteristics of a varied workforce, the CFMEU is of the view that FIFO employment is impacting on the mental health and wellbeing of some FIFO workers and, in our view, this impact is exacerbated by employment conditions utilised by companies.

The dearth of published studies and data on FIFO practices is particularly problematic when evaluating the impact and challenges of FIFO work arrangements on the psychological wellbeing of the FIFO workforce. This lack of data is an impediment to addressing the terms of reference of this inquiry. While there are limited academic studies on FIFO work practices, the gap in research on FIFO has historically been addressed through ad hoc research commissioned by not for profit groups and academic institutions. Although not the main focus of the Federal inquiry, the scarcity of available research was observed by the House Standing Committee's report, *Cancer of the bush or salvation for our cities? Fly-in, fly-out and drive-in, drive-out workforce practices in Regional Australia*. The report observed:

*"The lack of publicly available, accurate, nationally consistent information on a FIFO workforce, both across the resource sector and in individual communities and towns, is unacceptable and must be remedied."*⁶

The report went on to recommend:

". . . a comprehensive study into the health effects of FIFO/DIDO work practices and lifestyle factors.' (Recommendation 8)⁷

". . . research on the effect on children and family relationships of having a long-term FIFO/DIDO parent." (Recommendation 10)⁸

⁶ House Standing Committee on Regional Australia, [Cancer of the bush or salvation for our cities? Fly-in, fly-out and drive-in, drive-out workforce practices in Regional Australia](#), House of Representatives, 2013, page 39

⁷ House Standing Committee on Regional Australia, [Cancer of the bush or salvation for our cities? Fly-in, fly-out and drive-in, drive-out workforce practices in Regional Australia](#), House of Representatives, 2013, page xx

In our view, this lack of research has provided State and Federal governments with the excuse to not institute adequate safeguards and regulations on companies around their use of FIFO arrangements, particularly in Western Australia. This will be addressed in further detail later in the submission. The CFMEU in the first instance submits that the lack of data is invariably an impediment to this inquiry, however for the purpose of this submission; the CFMEU will make reference to aspects of existing research to support our concerns, which are informed by rigorous scrutiny of FIFO practices and our member's experiences throughout the State.

Notwithstanding, the paucity of available research, and the substantial shortcomings in the available data, a pragmatic approach to existing academic studies reinforces some of the challenges associated with FIFO employment. These have been identified through various preliminary studies. The impacts for workers consist of increased mental health risks including depression, physiological and psychological issues associated with fatigue, increased occupational health and safety risks, deteriorating personal relationships and a high frequency of employee turnover.⁹ Understanding the nature of these challenges is critical to evaluating *"the contributing factors that may lead to mental illness and suicide amongst FIFO workers."* It is equally salient to better manage the challenges associated with FIFO practices in the existing economic climate.

Mental Health and Worker Welfare

The CFMEU has been agitating for a greater focus on the mental health and wellbeing of FIFO workers for some time. The CFMEU is aware of a plethora of cases in Western Australia whereby FIFO workers have experienced relationship breakdowns, stress, depression, mental health issues and tragically, suicide. Our members tell us that they experience loneliness, isolation, family pressures, fatigue and burnout. A number of studies support our concerns about the impact of FIFO arrangements on workers, with some observing that the FIFO lifestyle adversely affects workers mental health and wellbeing, specifically their psychological wellbeing, relationships and family wellbeing more generally.¹⁰ The Public Health Association of Australia's submission to the inquiry into the use of FIFO workforce practices in regional Australia states that *"there is evidence that the fly-in, fly-out lifestyle may have a significant negative impact on workers physical and mental health, which has the potential to cause a range of short-term and long-term health and social harms."*¹¹ The evidence further suggests that in some circumstances the health of the workers' children and partners may be affected by the continued departure and return of the FIFO worker, disruptions to

⁸ House Standing Committee on Regional Australia, [Cancer of the bush or salvation for our cities? Fly-in, fly-out and drive-in, drive-out workforce practices in Regional Australia](#), House of Representatives, 2013, page xx

⁹ Gent, 2004; Clifford, 2009; Torkington, Larkins, & Gupta, 2011

¹⁰ Lifeline WA Report *FIFO/DIDO Mental Health*

Research Report 2013 accessed via

<http://www.lifelinewa.org.au/download/FIFO+DIDO+Mental+Health+Research+Report+2013.pdf>,

page 26

¹¹ Public Health Association of Australia, [Submission 220](#), page. 1

their social life and associated feelings of loneliness.¹² This finding is critical to a FIFO worker's mental health and wellbeing and their capacity to establish some normality and consistency while they are at home. While there are conflicting findings in this area, our members' experience supports these findings. The CFMEU is aware through our vigorous representation of members that the continued adjustment and readjustment cycle for FIFO workers and their families can result in feelings of guilt and turmoil for individual FIFO workers, as well as placing stress on the wider family unit.

The CFMEU submits that a worker's experience of the FIFO regime is greatly impacted by their conditions of employment. This is broadly supported by Sibel, in highlighting that there are a number of interacting community, company and individual factors that have been linked to the impact of FIFO work on individual workers, including location, size of the worksite, standard of FIFO accommodation, community attitudes, and accessibility of psychosocial supports as well as family situation.¹³ This will be addressed in greater detail later in the submission. Furthermore, it has been revealed that mental health issues, including depression, do not discriminate on grounds of gender, age or socio-economic status, rather those with a history of negative reactions to isolation and mental health issues may have a greater disposition to developing mental health problems while working as a FIFO worker. The CFMEU strongly submits that this reinforces the need for greater regulation of FIFO arrangements and better support structures, rather than individualised screening of workers that may lead to individual cases of discrimination.

More recently, the Australian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health (ACRRMH) visited a number of mining sites and conducted interviews with workers. Bowers (2011) reported that the interviews revealed that extended periods of separation from family and friends often correlated with a sense of isolation and a loss of a "sense of belonging" for the worker.¹⁴ In dealing with the recent spate of suicides among FIFO workers in Western Australia, it is critical to acknowledge that Ozhelp, a not for profit group funded to run suicide prevention strategies in the Pilbara, has estimated that the suicide rates among both mining and construction workers to be up to 70 per cent higher than the national average. The CFMEU has previously submitted that the higher than average suicide rate is largely attributable to fatigue, burnout and social isolation.¹⁵

¹² Dockery, L & Kendall (2009) and Kaczmarek & Sibbel (2008) cited in Public Health Association of Australia, [Submission 220](#), page 1

¹³ Lifeline WA Report *FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Research Report 2013* accessed via <http://www.lifelinewa.org.au/download/FIFO+DIDO+Mental+Health+Research+Report+2013.pdf>, page 30

¹⁴ Lifeline WA Report *FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Research Report 2013* accessed via <http://www.lifelinewa.org.au/download/FIFO+DIDO+Mental+Health+Research+Report+2013.pdf>, page 32

¹⁵ Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, *Submission 133*, page 36

Fatigue and Rosters

The CFMEU submits that fatigue is a significant and recurrent issue among FIFO construction workers in Western Australia and it is of critical importance to the scope of this inquiry. The FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Research Report 2013 commissioned by Lifeline WA accurately reinforces this point:

“Participants described experiencing a number of stressors arising from FIFO work.

Almost unanimously, the number one and most commonly reported stress was

separation from home, family and friends. Other stresses included:

... On-site physical exertion and fatigue.”¹⁶

According to the report, the stress of being away from home was directly related to roster length. The report observes:

“The majority of participants had experienced a variety of different rosters

in their FIFO careers and all reported that stress levels were proportional to the

amount of time spent on-site (away from home) and at home. All workers observed

that the shorter the time rostered on for work, and the longer the time allowed off

recuperating and being with family/friends, the less stress they experienced.”¹⁷

This point is especially salient when evaluating the key contributing factors that lead to mental health issues and suicide in the FIFO workforce. It is crucial to recognise that there is a substantial variance among FIFO rosters throughout Western Australia. FIFO workers are consistently categorised as a homogenous group for the purpose of research papers and the media at large, yet there is a significant disparity between the roster cycles of construction workers when compared to production workers employed for the mining phase of a project. The pretence for this disparity is the transient nature of the construction workforce with the regular demobilisation and mobilisation of workers that are based on a project during the construction phase. While it is evident that FIFO construction workers are mobile, the idea that construction workers are short term workers does not accurately depict the reality of many construction workers experience. The Lifeline WA Report reinforces this point:

“despite the assumption that construction workers on ‘4 weeks on/1 week off’ rosters recover during long non work break periods between projects; it remains common for them

¹⁶ Lifeline WA Report *FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Research Report 2013* accessed via <http://www.lifelinewa.org.au/download/FIFO+DIDO+Mental+Health+Research+Report+2013.pdf>, page 77

¹⁷ Lifeline WA Report *FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Research Report 2013* accessed via <http://www.lifelinewa.org.au/download/FIFO+DIDO+Mental+Health+Research+Report+2013.pdf>, page 78

to have short breaks before entering new projects which further adds to the accumulated fatigue.”¹⁸

One of the participants highlights the challenge that this presents:

“The rosters in construction are quite a bit longer, four weeks on, one week off at times ... within the construction industry ... they expect that you’re going to have a big break in between projects, which isn’t the case. I think part of mental health at the moment is, well coping with it, is guys to understand that they need that work-life balance because a four to one ratio of work (and a lot of guys are travelling for one to two days of that to go back over east or something like that) is not healthy. ... Physically your body can do it but mentally they’re probably not realising just how fatigued and run down and mildly depressed they’re becoming over small things and ... you start to snowball in effect.”¹⁹

The CFMEU submits that fatigue is a key concern for our members and in our view of critical importance to this inquiry. Construction workers that are based on resource projects generally work compressed shifts and long hours. A number of studies have suggested that fatigue increases ‘risk taking behaviours’ and that FIFO employees working longer hours are more likely to:

- engage in risk taking behaviours;
- exercise inappropriate risk assessment and make an inaccurate prediction of consequences; and
- have difficulty controlling mood and behaviour.²⁰

All of these are significant health and safety issues for construction workers that perform work in high risk environments that necessitate quick reaction times and the ability to respond to a consistently changing work environment. The CFMEU submits that accumulated fatigue arising from long rosters is a significant contributor to stress for FIFO workers and is in all probability a key contributor to mental health issues for the FIFO workforce. In a short WA Unions survey on FIFO, overwhelmingly participants indicated that rosters were a key concern to them, one survey respondent commented:

¹⁸ Lifeline WA Report *FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Research Report 2013* accessed via <http://www.lifelinewa.org.au/download/FIFO+DIDO+Mental+Health+Research+Report+2013.pdf>, page 78

¹⁹ Lifeline WA Report *FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Research Report 2013* accessed via <http://www.lifelinewa.org.au/download/FIFO+DIDO+Mental+Health+Research+Report+2013.pdf>, page 78

²⁰ (Keown, 2005) cited in Lifeline WA Report *FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Research Report 2013* accessed via <http://www.lifelinewa.org.au/download/FIFO+DIDO+Mental+Health+Research+Report+2013.pdf> page 27 and (Heiler, 2002) and (Harrison and Horne ,2000 cited in Dawson, McCulloch and Baker 2001) page 16

“We call 4 x 1 rosters the suicide roster. I will only do equal time ie. 4 x 4 weeks, 5 x 5 etc. I did 4 x 1 for 6 years and it almost cost me my marriage and my entire family life. When my wife was struggling I wasn't there to help and because I was only home one week I couldn't do much to help anyway. Quitting and coming home was my only option to look after my family. Being away more than you're home is not a life. 4 x 1 was designed for short contracts but we get the 'golden handcuffs' and the money is too hard to leave.”

Roster lengths are typically addressed as an industrial issue as part of enterprise bargaining. However, we submit that with growing evidence of the impact on mental health, it may be time to consider rosters as a health and safety issue.

The role of the Federal and State Government

When analysing the role of the Federal and State Government, and existing initiatives in relation to FIFO work practices in Western Australia, there has been little action on determining adequate safeguards and regulations around this work arrangement. Instead, the growth of FIFO in Western Australia has seen resource companies largely left to self regulate. There is no FIFO specific industry Code of Practice in Western Australia, there is no specific government legislation addressing minimum standards and no requirement for companies to provide data to inform policy formation. Consequently, working environment, standards of accommodation and conditions of employment are addressed by companies on a project by project basis. Western Australia has one of the highest numbers of FIFO workers per head of population in the world;²¹ and the CFMEU submits that there has been a failure to institute adequate regulation of FIFO work arrangements given the substantial FIFO workforce in Western Australia and the unique challenges that FIFO workers face.

To our knowledge this is the first time a State Parliament has initiated a comprehensive inquiry into FIFO practices with a particular focus on the impact of FIFO work on mental health, despite the Western Australian State Government recognising that there is a down side to FIFO work arrangements in a report on the need for a Skilled Workforce in 2010.²²

“However, the State Government recognises the potential for FIFO to have a negative impact on individuals and the opportunity cost to regional communities.”²³

At a Federal level, the House Standing Committee (the Committee) on Regional Australia report tabled on 13 February 2013 and entitled [Cancer of the bush or salvation for our cities? Fly-in, fly-out and drive-in, drive-out workforce practices in Regional Australia](#) noted that:

“Due to the lack of data on the extent and impact of FIFO workforces, governments at all levels do not have the necessary information to develop effective policy on the issue. At present, except for the FIFO coordinator role, no Commonwealth initiatives even attempt to focus on the unique issues and impacts associated with the use of FIFO workforce practices.”²⁴

To date the recommendations contained in this report remain dormant and companies continue to autonomously self regulate FIFO work practices. The CFMEU finds the current lack of regulation on FIFO work practices simply astounding, particularly in light of the unique relationship that exists

²¹ Sibbel A, *Living FIFO: The Experiences and Psychosocial Wellbeing of Western Australian*, Edith Cowan University, June 2010 (Thesis) Perth accessed via <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1132&context=theses>, page 16

²² Western Australia Department of Training and Workforce Development, SKILLING WA – A Workforce Development Plan for Western Australia 2010, Western Australian Government, 2010, Chapter 3, p. 101.

²³ Western Australia Department of Training and Workforce Development, SKILLING WA – A Workforce Development Plan for Western Australia 2010, Western Australian Government, 2010, Chapter 3, p. 101.

²⁴ House Standing Committee on Regional Australia, [Cancer of the bush or salvation for our cities? Fly-in, fly-out and drive-in, drive-out workforce practices in Regional Australia](#), House of Representatives, 2013, page130

between a FIFO employer and FIFO worker. The CFMEU submits that conditions of employment for FIFO workers place their employers in a unique position of control in the FIFO relationship and these conditions must be a primary consideration for the Committee. For FIFO workers, their unique conditions of employment render their employer responsible for their accommodation, transport, camp access, sleeping patterns, meals, communication access and medical care. This is a critical point when considering mental health and the adequacy of existing support structures that are in place for the FIFO workforce. To elaborate, if there is deficient mental health care on site or available to a FIFO worker, then vulnerable workers do not have adequate access to the support they require when they require it. The CFMEU submits that the unique nature of this employment condition places a greater obligation on companies to provide a high level of care to their workforce given that they are isolated from their usual support structures, including family and friends. It is unacceptable for an employer to simply meet the basic requirements of their workforce when a construction worker on a typical FIFO roster will be under their employer's care and control for 80% of the year. This alone places an even greater positive obligation on employers to be proactive in the workplace. In our experience, the provision or lack of provision of on-site services can have a significant impact on a worker's experience of FIFO arrangements, and we encourage the Committee to give significant consideration to this in view of the need to develop effective policy around FIFO work practices.

Accommodation Conditions and motelling

The CFMEU submits that standards of accommodation, in particular motelling, which is defined as the practice of being reallocated a different room each time a worker attends a site to commence a swing, disrupts the community fabric and social cohesiveness of accommodation villages. This is particularly important when evaluating FIFO workers access to peer support structures when mobilised on site and is especially salient for positive mental health and wellbeing.

When mobilised on site, FIFO workers reside in temporary accommodation villages that are provided by their employer. The temporary accommodation villages typically consist of a cluster of prefabricated, transportable dongas with an ensuite facility. In the past, FIFO workers have retained the same donga while mobilised on a resource construction project. However, motelling is becoming increasingly common on resource construction projects in Western Australia. The CFMEU has been consistently arguing for a review of motelling practices on sites throughout Western Australia. The CFMEU remains concerned about the potential health and mental health implications of motelling on FIFO workers.

The Lifeline WA Report made a number of observations regarding FIFO workers overriding reluctance to seek external mental health support, preferring to seek support from their friends, family or co-workers. This preference for seeking support from friends or co-workers legitimises the CFMEU's concerns with motelling presenting a significant barrier to establishing a home away from home which in our view is critical to a worker's sense of belonging.

The report states:

“Like this study, other research shows that FIFO workers prefer to turn to their immediate circle (family, friends, co-workers) for support and are largely averse to more formal supports (Voysey, 2012).”²⁵

While a donga won't replace a worker's home, arguably it is an important aspect of camp experience and it is true that with the introduction of motelling a worker may not know the person in the donga next to them. Perhaps one of the most tragic examples that exemplifies our concerns with motelling is an incident that occurred in December 2011 when a worker was found to have died in his donga. While the death was not suspicious, he was deceased in his donga for some days before being discovered. Clearly there is an issue if a man was deceased for days prior to being discovered.²⁶ FIFO construction workers are typically required to reside away from their usual place of residence for up to 80% of the year and the CFMEU submits that motelling impacts camp cohesiveness and a worker's experience of FIFO employment.

Classification of Camps as a Workplace

The CFMEU submits that the control that employers exercise over employees residing in FIFO camps can further the isolation that many workers experience which in turn can lead to greater stress. In particular, some employers have utilised various characteristics of FIFO and weaknesses in the *Fair Work Act 2009* to impede union access to workers. A union's primary role is to represent their members' interests and the *Fair Work Act 2009* provides union officials with access to fulfil this role in their workplaces. However, worker accommodation villages are not classified as a workplace under the Act and therefore the employer or operator of the camp is not required to facilitate access to the accommodation village, nor are officials allowed to stay at the accommodation villages, making it exceedingly difficult for FIFO workers to have proper access to union representation at a time and place of their choosing. This is a perennial concern for our members that have consistently expressed dissatisfaction with this arrangement. Namely, workers feel unable to have discussions with their union representative without feeling intimidated. The CFMEU is particularly concerned about this in the context of mental health and ensuring that vulnerable workers can obtain the support they need when they need it. Further to these concerns, an overwhelming majority of members indicated that concern for future employment prospects was the main barrier to FIFO workers seeking the help they need when responding to our survey. If mental health support is deficient on site, and workers are reluctant to seek help in the current economic climate, a worker may go without the support they need. This is not acceptable in 21st century Australia.

²⁵ Lifeline WA Report *FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Research Report 2013* accessed via <http://www.lifelinewa.org.au/download/FIFO+DIDO+Mental+Health+Research+Report+2013.pdf>, page 87

²⁶ Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, *Submission 133*, page 18

Camp management

While there are significant variables when addressing the broad issue of camp management, and mental health, a persistent issue for our members is the often rigorous control and supervision exercised over workers while residing in accommodation villages. This was reinforced by respondents to the WA Unions survey where they expressed their desire for greater freedom in their leisure time when on swing. The CFMEU submits that the modality of supervision, and in some cases restrictions on workers entering town, can further the isolation experienced by many FIFO workers and in turn heighten a worker's stress levels.

Inadequate telecommunications

The provision of adequate on-site telecommunications facilities is a perennial concern for FIFO workers that rely on on-site technology to communicate with their friends and family when they are away. Indeed phone and internet services are an important link to home and the impact of consistent service disconnections when on site can exacerbate a worker's stress, isolation and sense of disconnection from their social networks. 65 per cent of respondents to the WA Unions survey indicated that poor communication services with family and friends are a key source of stress for FIFO workers. This is reinforced by a recent petition which called for improved phone reception on Barrow Island that received 1000 signatures.²⁷ The CFMEU is aware of many cases of FIFO workers struggling to resolve issues at home as a result of stressed communication systems. This issue is in part attributable to insufficient bandwidth to cope with an influx of demand in a short period (between shift end and sleep). One respondent to our survey stated:

“Being able to communicate to families via internet like Skype would also make a massive difference too. No camp I have been on in my 6 years of working away in WA and QLD have given me good enough internet quality to be able to do this. There's nothing better than seeing loved ones face to face and having this option would be amazing. Especially when there are children involved and there [sic] father or mother is away most of the time.”

The CFMEU submits that the adequacy and accessibility of on-site technology is of critical importance to FIFO workers and the provision of high quality modern technology may assist in ameliorating some of the problems arising from isolation, loneliness and separation from family.

²⁷ ABC News Online (2014). “Petition calls for better Barrow Island Phone Reception” <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-20/petition-calls-for-better-barrow-island-phone/5683346> ABC News Online, 20 August 2014

On-site support services

While it is true that the stigma associated with mental health issues are not constrained to the FIFO workforce, the unique nature of the FIFO employment relationship, combined with the well documented 'macho culture'²⁸ present on construction sites are key determinants in the type of support services a FIFO worker will access if and when they need it. A survey respondent summarised these issues below:

"Many people still believe that there is too much stigma attached to discussing mental health with a professional. It defies the attitude of I'm fine, I'm tough and I can handle myself. Yet, FIFO workers suffer through workplace bullying, relationship breakdown, separation, divorce, broken families, missing their children, guilt from being the absent parent, unresolved conflicts with loved ones due to sheer isolation and at times absence of any means of communication to shoreline family and loved ones."

While some employers offer Employee Assistance Programs (**EAP**), the CFMEU submits that FIFO workers are increasingly concerned about their job security in the current economic climate and this concern acts as a significant deterrent to accessing formal support structures including EAP's, irrespective of the quality of the support offered. The overwhelming majority of our survey respondents considered job security a primary concern for workers and there is a perception that EAP access may not remain confidential and may well jeopardise a worker's employment. As the labour market becomes increasingly competitive and jobs become sparse, apprehension concerning job security will continue to rise. Even more alarming is this concern extends to accessing support systems outside of the workplace. One survey respondent put this into context:

"In my experience people who admit to having mental health issues find it hard to keep a FIFO position as if they choose to take medication it comes up in urine tests and once it does the employer won't have anything to do with them."

However, recognising that there is still an overwhelmingly dominant culture and social stigma persistent on-site is not a valid reason for failing to confront the issue of mental health in the workplace. Conversely the CFMEU is of the view that it requires an unwavering commitment to addressing these issues, irrespective of their complexity. The CFMEU is aware of some on-site work practices that in our view hinder the management of mental health issues on-site and in some cases mismanage them. We are aware of some sites charging supervisors, whose primary responsibility is to their workplace duties, with the responsibility of being the contact person for mental health issues in their teams. The CFMEU submits that this practice is a deterrent to workers seeking help.

²⁸ Lifeline WA Report *FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Research Report 2013* accessed via <http://www.lifelinewa.org.au/download/FIFO+DIDO+Mental+Health+Research+Report+2013.pdf>, page 50

There must be adequate protections for vulnerable workers seeking help and an appropriate separation between workplace issues and hierarchies and medical assistance.

Perhaps the most harrowing story that has recently been brought to the CFMEU's attention was a suicide attempt on a site in the North West, when a construction worker attempted suicide in his donga; which fortunately failed. The most concerning aspect of this story is the way in which the circumstances were allegedly handled by the employer. Following his attempt on his life in his room, the construction worker called a friend for urgent assistance. The friend immediately attended the construction worker's donga to find him distressed and in desperate need of assistance. The construction worker was not provided with medical assistance but rather, the site management attempted to send him home unaccompanied, with the EAP number. This turn of events reinforces the need for systems and processes to ensure on-site mental health issues are handled in an appropriate manner.

FIFO and the need for change

FIFO operates in isolated and harsh environments and we accept that some factors that may contribute to mental health issues are difficult for employers to control. However, while the physical rigours of construction employment are well recognised, there continues to be a persistent reluctance to address mental health with the same vigour. This is extremely concerning, particularly in light of the recent spate of suicides among FIFO workers.

In Western Australia, it is widely reported that there have been at least 9 suicides in the FIFO workforce in the past twelve months.²⁹ It is clear that there is an urgent need for all stakeholders to work together to mitigate and address mental health issues among FIFO workers. Fewer issues could be more important for resource companies than to immediately address this issue for the thousands of workers that FIFO for their employment.

The CFMEU has outlined a number of employment conditions that we believe contribute to stress and mental health issues for FIFO construction workers. While the variables and impact of these conditions will vary for individuals, the conditions that we have identified as contributing factors to stress are informed by our ongoing representation of our member's interests. The CFMEU welcomes the opportunity to provide further evidence to the Committee.

²⁹ Perth Now 2014, FIFO Suicides: WA Government's Education and Health Standing Committee to hold inquiry into recent fly-in fly-out deaths" <http://www.perthnow.com.au/news/western-australia/fifo-suicides-wa-governments-education-and-health-standing-committee-to-hold-inquiry-into-recent-flyin-flyout-deaths/story-fnhocxo3-1227031297172>, 21 August 2014

Recommendations

The CFMEU submits the following recommendations for the Committee's consideration:

Recommendation 1:

That the State and Federal Government engage with the Australian Bureau of Statistics to work collaboratively towards ensuring that more adequate data concerning the number of FIFO workers in Western Australia is recorded. This information should focus on the data necessary to better understand and manage the impact of FIFO arrangements on the workforce, families, local communities and the Western Australian community more generally, by at least collecting data on:

- the age of workers;
- the length of rosters;
- length of engagement;
- marital status; and
- number of children.

Recommendation 2:

That the State Government ensures that all worker accommodation villages have access to adequate quality telecommunication and internet services so as to ensure that FIFO workers can facilitate communication between the worker and his/her family.

Recommendation 3:

That the State Government establish a process to conduct social impact statements, similar to environmental impact statements, on all resource project approvals.

Recommendation 4:

Employers of FIFO workers provide and pay for any assistance required for FIFO worker's experiencing difficulties coping with FIFO.

Recommendation 5:

In recognising that independence and confidentiality are essential in ensuring workers feel comfortable enough to use formal support services, the CFMEU recommends that employers facilitate the provision of independent support services to ensure that there is a distinct separation between workplace hierarchies and mental health support services.

Recommendation 6:

Those utilising a FIFO workforce meet on a regular basis with employers, workers and their representatives to discuss any issues that workers may have with respect to the FIFO arrangements that are in place.

Recommendation 7:

That peer support is promoted and better fostered as a practical way in which FIFO workers can support each other; this may be in the form of training and better equipping peers to identify if their co-worker is in distress.

Recommendation 8:

Roster lengths and compressions should be considered a health and safety issue and as such should be subject to regulation. This may be in the form of a Code of Practice or enforced regulatory regime around optimum roster length such as 3 weeks away, 1 week off or 20 days away, 10 days off.

Recommendation 9:

That employers using a FIFO workforce consult with their employees and their representatives to improve fatigue management practices.

Recommendation 10:

That mental health among FIFO workers should be considered a health and safety issue and as such should be subject to a regulatory regime as a way of ensuring best practice support for the mental health and wellbeing of FIFO workers. This may be in the form of a Code of Practice or enforced regulatory regime.

Recommendation 11:

That Accommodation villages' should be treated as a workplace for the purposes of reporting injuries and fatalities.

Recommendation 12:

That travel time is properly taken into account as part of working hours and this is to be taken from the usual place of residence of the FIFO worker, and not the point of hire.

Recommendation 13:

That the State and where applicable, Local governments establish a set of standards reflecting a base standard of accommodation which excludes motelling and double bunking, and provides for adequate leisure facilities and a dignified environment for workers living in camps.

Recommendation 14:

Workers residing in accommodation villages should be entitled to similar rights as residents in caravan parks and the like, including the right to privacy and the right to freely associate with persons of their choice while in the accommodation village.

References

S Clifford,' The Effects of Fly-in/Fly-out Commute Arrangement and Extended Working Hours on the Stress, Lifestyle, Relationship and Health Characteristics of Western Australian Mining Employees and their Partners: Preliminary Report of Research Findings', Perth, School of Anatomy and Human Biology, The University of Western Australia, 2009.

Commission for Occupational Safety and Health (2006). "*Code of practice: Working hours.*" *Western Australian Department of Consumer and Employment Protection*. Retrieved from: http://www.commerce.wa.gov.au/WorkSafe/PDF/Codes_of_Practice/COPworkinghours.pdf

Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, Submission to the Standing Committee on Regional Australia's Inquiry into the Use of "Fly-In, Fly-Out' (FIFO) and 'Drive-In, Drive-Out' (DIDO) Workforce Practices in Regional Australia, *Submission 133*

Chamber of Minerals and Energy, Submission to the Standing Committee on Regional Australia's Inquiry into the Use of "Fly-In, Fly-Out' (FIFO) and 'Drive-In, Drive-Out' (DIDO) Workforce Practices in Regional Australia, *Submission 99*

Public Health Association of Australia, Submission to the Standing Committee on Regional Australia's Inquiry into the Use of "Fly-In, Fly-Out' (FIFO) and 'Drive-In, Drive-Out' (DIDO) Workforce Practices in Regional Australia, *Submission 220*

Beyondblue, Submission to the Standing Committee on Regional Australia's Inquiry into the Use of "Fly-In, Fly-Out' (FIFO) and 'Drive-In, Drive-Out' (DIDO) Workforce Practices in Regional Australia *Submission 228*

Western Australian Local Government Association, Submission to the Standing Committee on Regional Australia's Inquiry into the Use of "Fly-In, Fly-Out' (FIFO) and 'Drive-In, Drive-Out' (DIDO) Workforce Practices in Regional Australia, *Submission 156*

Department of Mines and Petroleum. Review of fatal accidents in WA mines 2000-12. Retrieved from <http://www.dmp.wa.gov.au/16259.aspx#16263>

Department of Mines and Petroleum Fatigue shift structures and working hours. Retrieved from <http://www.dmp.wa.gov.au/16259.aspx#16263>

Dawson, D., McCulloch, K. & Baker, A. (2001). *Extended Working Hours in Australia—Counting the Costs*. The Centre for Sleep Research, The University of South Australia, Adelaide

Folkard, S., & Tucker, P. (2003). Shift work, safety and productivity. *Occup Med (Lond)*, 53(2), 95-101.

Gallegos, D. (2006). "Fly-in Fly-out employment: Managing the parenting transitions. Summary and key findings." Ngala & Meerilinga. Retrieved from: www.ngala.com.au/docs/Fly%20In%20Fly%20Out%20Report.pdf

Gent, V. M. (2004). *The impacts of fly-in/fly-out work on well-being and work-life satisfaction*. School of Psychology. Murdoch University, Bachelor of Arts (Honours), Perth.

Heiler, K. (2002) *The Struggle for Time: A review of extended shifts in the Tasmanian mining industry – Overview report*, Report prepared for the Tasmanian Government.

Hill, I. (2012). Consultant, Regional Development Australia Pilbara (RDA Pilbara), *Transcript of Evidence*, Karratha, 28 March 2012

House of Representatives (2013). *Cancer of the bush or salvation for our cities? Fly-in, fly-out and drive-in, drive-out workforce practices in Regional Australia*. Canberra: The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Mines Occupational Safety and Health Advisory Board (MOSHAB) (2000) - *The Guideline for Fatigue Management for the Western Australian Mining Industry*.

Russell, L. (2012). Chief Executive Officer, Cairns Regional Council, *Transcript of Evidence*, Cairns, 21 February 2012

Torkington Amanda May, Larkins Sarah and Sen Gupta Tarun, '[The psychosocial impacts of fly-in fly-out and drive-in drive-out mining on mining employees: A qualitative study](#)', *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, vol. 19 (3), June 2011

Western Australia Department of Training and Workforce Development, *SKILLING WA – A Workforce Development Plan for Western Australia 2010*, Western Australian Government, 2010

