

The Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union *WA 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**



September 2014

Foreword

While fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) work has been a part of Western Australia's employment patterns since at least the 1970s, we have witnessed exponential growth over the past twenty years. During that time, WA has experienced an estimated 400 per cent increase in the number of FIFO workers,¹ and FIFO work is now a standard part of the WA employment landscape. Industry estimates put the number of WA FIFO workers at around 50,000: half the total number of Western Australians employed in the resources sector. Industry expectations are that this figure will continue to increase, reaching 63,000 by 2015.²

Yet this exponential increase in FIFO practices has not been accompanied by adequate research or government oversight into the potential adverse effects of this non-conventional workplace arrangement. While general arguments for and against FIFO work can be found elsewhere, it is the position of the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) that every stakeholder owes it to FIFO workers and their families to work together to understand and mitigate the adverse impacts of the FIFO lifestyle. This is especially true for the resource companies who literally take the lives of workers into their hands during swings away.

While the physical rigours of resource and construction work are well understood, if not always adequately acted upon, the same cannot be said for mental health in the FIFO industry. This must change and we applaud the WA Parliament's Education and Health Standing Committee for taking the step to better understand FIFO's mental health impacts.

The AMWU represents 10,000 members in Western Australia. Included in our union's coverage are many workers who are essential to the completion of Western Australia's resource engineering projects – trades assistants, boilermakers, fitters, welders, riggers, scaffolders, mechanics, non-destructive testing technicians, sheet metal workers and many more. Our submission is based on our representation of these members over many years, publicly available research and survey of more than 300 people we conducted with the CFMEU, ETU and MUA to assist with this inquiry. We would like to make particular mention of Lifeline WA's *FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Report 2013*, an invaluable contribution to our understanding and the only research of its type we have found.

I have personally worked FIFO on engineering projects for a large portion of my life 'on the tools' and I am well aware of the difficulties this lifestyle can create. While we are no longer working 14 weeks on and one week off without even a mention of mental health as we were during the 1980s, we still have a long way to go. I believe this inquiry has great potential to show the way toward further improvements in conditions and positive outcomes for working people. The AMWU thanks the Committee for the opportunity to provide input into this inquiry and trust the following submission assists with your valuable work.

Steve McCartney

Western Australian State Secretary
Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union

¹ 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

² Chamber of Minerals and Energy Submission to the House Standing Committee on Regional Australia FIFO Inquiry, 2011, p 8

FIFO in context

Western Australia's vast natural resource assets are worthless without the workers we need to get them out of the ground, processed and shipped to market. Reconciling the disparities between where workers live and where the resources are has been a perennial problem for governments and companies seeking to profit from our vast natural wealth. Until the 1970s, the preferred government solution was to impose prescriptive requirements on proponents to develop community infrastructure to attract workers and their families to resource rich areas. Tom Price, Newman and Paraburdoo in the Pilbara are testaments to this approach.

FIFO began to emerge in the early 1980s as an alternative solution to the problem of remoteness of resource deposits. Resource companies favoured this method of solving their labour supply problem as it meant greater focus on the project itself and was of course cheaper to establish temporary work camps rather than functioning communities. Shorter mine life cycles and problems associated with decommissioning towns after deposits are exhausted have also been cited as reasons business favours the FIFO system.³ With the strong encouragement of resource companies, FIFO has now become the default labour force model for Australian resource development, especially in Western Australia. FIFO practices have grown exponentially over the past decade, to the point where approximately 50,000 Western Australian workers and many of their families depend on the practice. It has been estimated that by 2020, 83% of Pilbara mine workers will be FIFO.⁴

As for the impact on employees, the AMWU submits it is difficult to speak in general terms about the characteristics and preferences of such a large and inevitably varied workforce. Some workers prefer the FIFO lifestyle, while others would prefer to relocate to the local area of employment if it was an option. This submission is not the place to debate the merits of either approach. For the AMWU, this inquiry is an opportunity to investigate how we can practically optimise a widespread employment pattern for thousands of Western Australian workers. Of course, working FIFO is a decision that comes with downsides and upsides for workers – and workers by and large accept the compromises that are necessary to work FIFO. But that does not mean that minimum conditions, especially for mental health, should be considered in any other context than for the most vulnerable and at risk workers on site.

While we will cover specific FIFO challenges for workers in greater details below, a very important overarching theme is the control employers exercise over employees in the FIFO relationship. For at least half of direct resource workers today, FIFO is the only option employers will facilitate. This necessitates employees placing themselves completely into the care of their employer for weeks at a time. Employees are completely dependent on their employer for basic sustenance, accommodation, transport, sleeping patterns, communication and most importantly, medical care. This is a crucial point when it comes to mental health as there is literally nowhere else for vulnerable workers to obtain the support they require. If mental health support is deficient on site, workers go

³ Above, n2, p 8

⁴ FIFI/DIDO Mental Health Research Report *Lifeline WA* available at <http://www.lifelinewa.org.au/download/FIFO+DIDO+Mental+Health+Research+Report+2013.pdf>, p 24

without. At no time is that acceptable in 21st century Australia. In this context, it is a worrying sign that up to 20 per cent of FIFO workers report no mental health support services *at all* on their sites.⁵

The AMWU submits that this must be a major consideration of the Committee. While companies favour FIFO work patterns because it relieves them of the burden of community development, it places an even greater positive obligation to care for the people they willingly take under their care and control. This must take the form of a positive obligation to be proactive in the workplace. Mere passive provision of services is unacceptable and inadequate when, on a typical ‘four weeks on, one week off’ construction roster, a worker will be under the direct care of their employer for 292 days of the year. This point is especially salient when considering the barriers resource companies erect, both physical and legal, to prevent non-employees from entering work camps. Certainly, union officials are unable to exercise rights of entry to support members while in camp, even in emergency situations.

The growth of FIFO has occurred almost completely under the self-regulation of resource companies. As a consequence, FIFO accommodation management has largely been dealt with on a company by company or even project by project basis. There is no FIFO-specific industry code of practice, there is no specific government legislation dealing with minimum standards and as mentioned, no requirements to provide data to inform government policy. The complex issues of housing and servicing thousands of people are dealt with largely behind closed doors by private companies. The AMWU finds this scenario extraordinary, given the huge numbers of workers involved and the unique challenges FIFO workers face.

A consequence of industry self-regulation is the huge variation in FIFO standards between companies, sites and projects, including the variables that we submit influence mental health outcomes. In our experience, larger companies with larger workforces are far more likely to allow for provision of mental health services on site and offer superior facilities. But the size of one’s employer should not determine the level of medical care available. We accept that a broad-ranging inquiry such as this one, covering tens and thousands of workers, hundreds of companies and dozens of sites necessitates a level of generalisation. However, we urge the Committee to keep in mind the shortcomings of generalising about a very diverse industry.

Submission 1 Camps should be treated as a workplace for the purposes of reporting injury, medical issues and union access
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A lack of data

A particularly concerning consequence of the ‘hands-off’ government approach to FIFO is the lack of reliable information. There is no single State or Federal government entity that collects even the most basic data on numbers of FIFO workers in the country. As the report of the House of Representatives’ Parliamentary inquiry into FIFO *Cancer of the Bush* noted last year, a lack of data should be of significant concern to every industry stakeholder:

“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

⁵ Above, n 4, p 46

The knowledge gap has been filled to an extent by unions, industry groups, not-for-profit groups and academic institutions through ad hoc surveys and research. However, the House of Representatives Committee made clear that this approach engendered significant shortcomings, specifically that '[a]s the available data is inconclusive, a wide range of parties each makes use of their own estimates of FIFO worker presence to support their claims.'⁷ And further 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.”⁸

While that Committee did not deal specifically with mental health, we submit that a lack of information should be of significant concern to the current inquiry. The AMWU believes the State and Federal governments' lack of data around Western Australia's FIFO workforce is a significant impediment to addressing the terms of reference. Indeed, there could be few issues more pressing for the WA resources industry than the mental health of its 50,000 strong FIFO workforce. Yet in trying to come to grips with a suicide epidemic in the industry, we find ourselves from the outset relying on private estimates of even the most elementary characteristics of the industry.

Submission 2 That the WA State government and Federal government work more closely together to provide accurate FIFO data to the Australian Bureau of Statistics on the FIFO industry

Factors that influence FIFO mental health

FIFO by its nature operates in isolated and harsh environments and we freely accept that some potentially influential factors are difficult for employers to control. However, we submit that where certain factors are found to have a detrimental effect on mental health, there is an obligation to mitigate the associated risks. Based on a combination of member feedback over many years, the survey WA FIFO unions initiated to assist with this inquiry and recent empirical research, the following factors are those which the AMWU considers of significant importance to the mental health of FIFO workers.

Fear of employment repercussions

The fear of negative effects on future employment was the most common answer our survey respondents gave when asked 'when struggling with a mental health issue, what do you think are the main reasons FIFO workers don't seek help themselves?' 57.5 per cent of 236 respondents listed this as a potential factor. These observations are extremely concerning, especially in the context of FIFO workers' reliance on employers for mental health support while 'on swing'. If employees feel that raising mental health issues can jeopardise employment, we submit that it is highly unlikely on-site services will be used, irrespective of quality or type. As the resources construction boom winds down and job opportunities become increasingly scarce, it is inevitable that security of employment will grow as factor in FIFO workers' considerations on how and indeed *whether* to seek help. This is

⁶ Above, n 1, p 39

⁷ Above, n 1, p 17

⁸ Above, n 1, p 130

particularly important given the low levels of job security already prevalent in the resources industry.

These observations were reflected in some of the qualitative responses to our survey. For example:

"I am currently dealing with several people suffering very stressful situations. I'm just looking out for workmates. If they go to management they will be sacked, they can't afford that stress as it is also financial problems. Management openly lie and say they are there to help and then if you go to them they say you are not suitable to be in this environment and sack them."

Some respondents also reported fear of repercussions even if they sought professional help outside work for mental illness and had been diagnosed and prescribed medication:

"A lot of people are too afraid to take antidepressants short term due to drug testing and as a result management find out person is suffering from depression and then usually confidentiality is out the window and the whole team finds out."

Another respondent commented:

"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."

It follows that it would be counterproductive for management or resource companies to respond to increased awareness and scrutiny of mental health for FIFO workers with increasingly rigorous scrutiny and screening. Such an approach would inevitably drive more workers away from disclosing conditions and seeking help. Promoting mental health and ensuring decent support structures are in place must be accepted as part and parcel of requiring workers to spend long periods of time away from their homes. As we have seen, companies favour FIFO because it requires less rigorous community development in the task of getting the workforce to the resources. But FIFO has costs that in the 21st century must be viewed as non-negotiable, and taking adequate care of workers' mental health is surely one of them.

<p>Submissions 3 The AMWU believes independence and confidentiality are essential in ensuring employees feel comfortable enough to use formal support services. We should be investigating use of third independent third party providers of FIFO mental health services.</p>
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Reactions from supervisors or co-workers

While social stigma around mental health is a whole-of-society issue, it is clear from research undertaken so far that it is an important contributing factor in whether FIFO workers seek help and the types of support they are likely to utilise. Social stigma surrounding mental health issues are likely to be exacerbated on site by the well-documented 'macho culture' prevalent in the FIFO industry.⁹ It is no surprise that general male characteristics in relation to mental health such as trouble identifying symptoms, negative attitudes towards asking for help and identifying credible

⁹ Above, n 4, p 50

coping strategies are more prevalent in a workforce containing over 80 per cent male workers.¹⁰ Responses to our survey reinforced this finding:

"Too many men are brought up to believe that "men do not talk about feelings or show emotion";

"It's still a man's world, where "real" men don't talk about deep issues. If someone does mention a problem everyone goes quiet and all of a sudden the roof and floor look really interesting";

and

"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."

However, general social stigma does not mean that fears in confronting mental illness are not the responsibility of those who take workers into their care. On the contrary, it requires a deeper commitment to tackling these issues, which 56.7 percent of respondents to our survey indicated were an important consideration for FIFO workers. There are certain workplace practices that we believe hamper the sensitive handling of mental health issues. For example, on some sites workplace supervisors are charged with responsibility for acting as the contact person for mental health issues for their teams. The AMWU submits that this practice deters people from seeking help, as supervisors' primary responsibility is to their workplace duties and considerations. Neither is it guaranteed that supervisors are adequately trained or will respect the privacy of workers who take them into their confidence. One respondent to our survey deplored the 'insidious bonus seeking culture within management that constantly seeks the cheapest option.' We submit there must be clear separation between workplace issues and medical issues at all times to maintain the integrity of support services and avoid real or perceived conflicts of interest.

Submission 4 We need better separation between workplace hierarchies and medical health support and more independence around reporting, diagnosis and treatment of mental health.

Peer support

While the accessibility and quality of formal mental health support services are extremely important, the AMWU submits there is great potential for increasing the effectiveness of peer support for FIFO workers. The main reason is that FIFO workers, especially males, are more likely to use these support networks in times of distress. We would argue this is because it lessens some of the concerns with formal support we have discussed so far, such as employment ramifications and confidentiality.

However we are concerned that 143 of 255 respondents to our survey indicated they don't feel equipped to raise mental health issues to support a colleague on the job. Fear of offending if assistance was rejected was a factor identified by 77 respondents, or 30.2 per cent. This indicates to us that more effort needs to be put into giving employees the tools they require to support their

¹⁰ Above, n 4, p 44

workmates if they choose to try to assist. It is also worth noting that 35.3 percent of respondents to our survey would hesitate to report an issue with a colleague because they would not want to cause trouble with management for their peer.

Submission 5 Peer support should be promoted and better fostered as a practical and realistic way in which FIFO workers can support each other

FIFO rosters

While so far we have concentrated on the factors that influence the effectiveness of mental health support, no serious discussion on FIFO mental health can avoid acknowledging the structural variables of the industry that influence mental health outcomes. The AMWU believes that this is the real 'elephant in the room' when it comes to understanding mental health in the FIFO industry. Having support mechanisms in place is essential, but acknowledging the influence of systemic, structural factors is absolutely vital. Of course, these are the issues that are more expensive for resource companies to overcome with measures such as employing more people, locating more skilled workers or investing more in camp accommodation and facilities. As one respondent indicated:

"People don't want to talk about problems with other people. And talking about it isn't really the answer. It's the conditions that we experience as FIFO. Make camps more liveable. Make mining towns more liveable so people relocate."

We submit key variables in this respect are roster length (length of time away) and roster compression (the ratio of time away to time at home). When we asked survey respondents to name one thing they would change about the FIFO lifestyle, 190 of 239 or 79.5 percent of respondents selected 'roster length.' We believe long rosters exacerbate the main causes of stress for FIFO workers more than any other. As indicated by the Lifeline Report¹¹ these include:

- Length of time away from family;
- Missing out on key life events;
- Isolation and remoteness;
- Boredom in camp;
- Poor telecommunications; and
- Adjustment between home and work.

In our experience, FIFO workers accept these factors are an inevitable part of the FIFO employment deal. However, we submit that management of variables in the FIFO industry are key to mitigating their manifestation as triggers of serious mental health consequences.

Again, we wish to emphasise the difference between standard maintenance and production rosters of two weeks on and one week off and construction rosters which are typically four weeks on one week off, but can range up to six weeks on one week off. In the past, construction rosters have been as lengthy as fourteen weeks on and one week off. Said one respondent:

¹¹ Above, n 4, p 63-67

"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."

Another commenter noted:

"I have been in a relationship/marriage with a FIFO worker for 6 years now. For 5 years he has worked 2 weeks on, 2 weeks off and the last year 3 weeks on, 1 week off. He is really struggling with the less time at home and I know many others do also. One week at home after so much time away is just not enough! Especially as many do not live in Perth so they spend 1-2 days of each week off travelling to and from Perth."

In relation to effectively coping with stress the Lifeline found that:

"...those working higher compression rotations report engagement in more non-effective coping mechanisms, such as ignoring personal needs and withdrawing. These findings are consistent with the suggestion that higher compression rotations are associated with negative wellbeing."¹²

So far, in keeping with industry self-regulation as previously discussed, the issue of roster length has been dealt with an industrial issue as part of Enterprise Bargaining negotiations. However, we submit that with the evidence of the impact on mental health, it is time to consider rosters in the same way as other health and safety issues. Just as it would be inconceivable today to leave, for example, adequate provision of Personal Protection Equipment to the vagaries of workplace bargaining.

Submission 6 Roster lengths and compressions should be considered a health and safety issue with legislated minimum standards

Indeed, something that has been noted through various studies is that mental health is not taken as seriously as physical health. While we hesitate to speculate on the precise reasons, measurability could be a factor as well broader societal thinking on the relative importance of physical and mental health. Bower has argued that:

"...until physical health and mental health are on the same level in regards to the attention and priority they receive, the mining and construction industry will experience an increase in sub-standard productivity, stress claims and diminished returns."¹³

One response to our survey put this claim in stark perspective with the observation that: "On Gorgon they have over 80 HSE [*Health, Safety and Environment – AMWU*] full time staff looking after people's physical health but not one single full time counsellor looking after people's mental health."

Inadequate telecommunications

¹² Above, n 4, p 51

¹³ Above, n 4, p 40

Poor telecommunication facilities are another vitally important variable for FIFO workers. Phone and internet services are considered workers 'lifeline' home and the impact of disruptions or lack of service compounds feelings of stress and isolation in a way that is very difficult to understand for someone who has not experienced it firsthand. A recent petition calling for better phone reception on Barrow Island received 1000 signatures.¹⁴ 156 of 241 of our survey respondents selected 'poor communication services with family and friends' when asked 'what are the main sources of stress for FIFO workers?' As 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 their father or mother is away most of the time."

Part of the problem is caused by insufficient bandwidth for very high demand during the short amount of time between shifts finishing and sleep. We have heard reports of workers smashing phones in frustration at being unable to talk to their families or that if anything comes up at home requiring serious attention, workers must take a day off and use the facilities while others are at work.

Submission 7 Adequate telecommunications are the most cost effective and powerful tool resource companies can provide for their workforce and must be improved across the board

Camp management and accommodation

Again, the large variations between the quality and type of camp accommodation and the services provided make generalisations about these services difficult. The AMWU submits that camp villages should be an environment that provides stability and a community atmosphere with facilities to communicate effectively with loved ones, interact with other camp users, and facilitate genuine rest and relaxation.

A common complaint from our members is that camps are run extremely strictly. While the AMWU understands a degree of routine is essential to the smooth running of camps, overzealous camp security guards, fences and razor wire 'for workers own protection' and stringent controls on leaving camp can have an adverse impact on the community fabric of camp life. An example of the impact of strict camp leave was on the Wheatstone Project last year, where Bechtel told members there would be strict enforcement of very low limits to visits into Onslow on scheduled says off. Instead, workers were told they would have to go to Karratha, which would mean workers spent most of their day off in a bus. This is further example of the control employees are able to exert over employees and the powerlessness employees feel to change their circumstances. We believe these kinds of decisions feed into the 'prison camp' reputation of certain FIFO camps. For example, as submitted to our survey:

"Treating us like recalcitrant prisoners will never ensure company loyalty or our best days work." and

¹⁴ ABC News Online, available at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-20/petition-calls-for-better-barrow-island-phone/5683346>

and

“Reliable internet and mobile reception is essential, more to create community and connection on site, group and club activities, being able to personalise dongas and not do back to back.”

Other camp practices such as “motelling”, where workers change dongas at each swing, dissolve the community fabric that exists with more permanent arrangements and undermine camp cohesiveness.

FIFO camps should be run as the communities they are and having continuity of neighbours is more likely to result in mutually supportive support camp relationships. In our experience, the stability non-motelling camps promote results in higher likelihood of peers identifying mental and physical changes in workmates and more openness in discussing accompanying issues. Knowing your neighbours also provides a level of comfort to vulnerable workers during long swings away from regular support networks. Additionally, we submit that the insidious practice of ‘hot bedding’ where one worker leaves a bed for his shift only to have it filled during his absence is the worst possible scenario for comfort, privacy, stability and sanitation and should be banned outright.

Conclusion

Despite exponential growth over the past two decades, FIFO is almost completely self-regulated. Improvements in standards have generally been driven by industrial campaigns by unions or forced through competition during labour shortages. When the practice began, few could have predicted the massive scale of FIFO today. In those days, FIFO workers with mental health issues had to suffer in silence. With the advances in social attitudes and medical research about mental health, it is untenable that we continue on without insisting on best practice in the FIFO industry.

The AMWU believes the time is well overdue for government to get to grips with the FIFO industry. That starts with collecting consistent and reliable data on our burgeoning FIFO workforce. We need to recognize the dependence of FIFO workers on their employers and the necessity of companies paying more than lip service to mental health standards and workers’ concerns. We also need to acknowledge the very real fears employees have about job security, lack of pathway back to work and the desire workers have to be able to assist each other in times of need.

We also need to acknowledge the systemic issues that arise through the very model of work itself and mitigate these as a priority. While there is not much we can do about the physical remoteness of resource deposits, the same cannot be said for length of time away from family, roster compressions, poor communications services, badly managed camps and camp boredom. FIFO exists because it is optimal for resources companies. The AMWU believes Western Australia should be bold in making it optimal for workers too.