

# The Maritime Union of Australia WA Branch

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Submission to the Education and Health  
Standing committee of the Western Australia  
Legislative inquiry into mental health impacts  
of FIFO work arrangements



The Maritime Union of Australia represents over 15000 members nationally with members who are stevedores, divers, seafarers and oil and gas workers. The West Australian branch is the largest with some 5000 members.

The Maritime Union of Australia WA Branch (MUA) believes that the mental health is a very serious issue among FIFO/DIDO workforce. Or FISO - Fly in, Ship out as is the case for a number of our members. It is affecting the current and long term occupational safety, health and welfare of all employees in the industry.

We thank the committee for the opportunity to provide this submission for your consideration.

Workers who are FIFO /DIDO place themselves entirely in the hands of the employer. They are completely reliant on the employer to provide accommodation, transport, rosters, plus communication, medical and nutritional needs. This depending on the roster worked can be for greater periods of time then a worker is actually spending at home.

We do however believe that there is a serious lack of reliable information to use as a starting point when examining this issue. Much of the information comes from on the ground knowledge after years of representing our members and trust it will assist your enquiry.

The lack of real data around this issue starts with the fact we have no idea how many workers are actually FIFO / DIDO/FISO in Western Australia. Figures quoted are between 40000 to 65000 workers in Western Australia depending on who you speak too.

The definition of what constitutes a workplace death is also not uniform across the different agencies. With the Coroner's office, WA Police and the various safety regulators being completely at odds with each other as to what determines a workplace death.

Currently suicides in the workplace are not classified as a work related fatality. So we are not collecting the data. Very hard to know what the full extent of the problem is and therefore provide meaningful and lasting solutions.

Road deaths which occur on FIFO jobs between camp accommodation and the minesite/worksites is not regarded as a workplace death. The only circumstance that Worksafe/Resource Safety would investigate a death under these circumstances is if work fatigue was a factor determined by the WA Police. The MUA believes fatigue should be an automatic factor in every road death of a FIFO worker, if it occurs while on the job.

We strongly believe that when suicide occurs in the FIFO work environment should be viewed as a workplace fatality, until proven otherwise. Statistics should be kept, released and all fatalities should be investigated, with the surrounding circumstances well understood.

What happened to mental health issues in this state from the time of the resources boom? We know that accident and injury rates for Stevedores and Seafarers are on the rise in WA. What are the long term effects on workers and society alike? If there is an increase of stress related injuries and suicides what can it be statistically attributed too? Research is desperately needed.

### **Contributing factors that may lead to mental illness and suicide amongst FIFO workers**

#### Roster and shift patterns

This is overwhelmingly the most common issue expressed to the MUA from our members. Long shift swings of four and even six week swings coupled with long shifts even beyond the 12 now standard acceptable hours worked per day.

There are no recovery days or breaks in any of these swings or shift patterns. Some work sites have a policy where workers can “call fatigue” but this usually means heading back to a donger to try and sleep, and usually they have to give up a sick leave day as a result.

Add to this, broken or split shift patterns, being on call, combination night and day shifts and we have a recipe for fatigued stressed out workers.

As a state we do not have any quantitative information on the type of rosters, who, how many are working on them, for how long and what are the patterns. FIFO reporting in the media never disseminates between what type or length of roster they are reporting on are 1:1, 2:1, 3:2, 4:1, 4:4, 5:4 or 6:1 swings.

Workers report it is not just the length of swing but also the daily shift length and type of work they do that contributes to the fatigue and mental health of employees. Add to this hot, physically demanding tasks and high stress work with perhaps worries of home and it's a deadly combination. Leaving workers feel isolated and alone.

Workers who report or call fatigue often face disciplinary action for not managing their own fatigue or not fit for the job.

#### Lack of communication with family friends and even site peers

Second on the list of major concerns raised by members at the union is the lack of any or consistent ability to communicate on the job to home. Many employers don't supply broadband wifi or any internet services. Workers rely on personal mobile phones.

Rural internet services are often nonexistent or slow specially at the required peak times.

Many sites do not allow mobile phones to be carried or used during the long shifts, often workers have no access to computers either company provided or their own.

The MUA has been told by a number of companys that they “don't like” seafarers/workers bringing their laptops from home to use on a vessel during a four week swing. They say workers are there to do a job, not be side tracked by issues at home. The other reason given is that the insurance costs if workers drops or damages a personal laptop on board is costly.

### Lack of communication privacy

Vessels often only have satellite phone communication which is only available to be used on the bridge of the vessel. One company the MUA is aware of even makes employees pay to use the one and only satellite phone to call home during a five week roster. No mobile phones or internet is available.

Some employers do provide computer work stations or the use of satellite or company phones to make personal calls and communication on. These are never good for privacy. Often in offices or group computer stations hubs. So workers can't discuss confidential, sensitive or even be romantic with partners or family when they call home.

MUA members have reported on some vessels that the satellite phone is bolted to the desk near the computer on the vessel. Seafarers wanting to access family, Employee Assistance Program type services or talk to their Union representatives must do so in full hearing range of the entire bridge crew of Captain and other crew.

Some employers will allow a maximum of five minutes per week or twenty minutes per four/ five week swing to call home using the bridge satellite phone. One such incident reported was from a seafarer who was a new dad, talking to his wife who suffering from post natal depression on the phone in the bridge had everyone listening in.

Another seafarer tells of how he received the news on his marriage ending as a result of his negative fertility test. The whole crew found out about this after officers on the bridge overheard his conversation. This seafarer had a major and prolonged break down as a result. He tried to kill himself on two occasions.

### Poor accommodation standards

Noisy camps and sleeping cabins/areas, shared sleeping arrangements. Some vessels have four people to a shared cabin living 24 hours a day for four/five weeks at a time. Bad mattresses, shared toileting facilities, heat, unhygienic rooms, low quality food. All contribute to feeling fatigued and increasing stress at work.

### Fatigue

It is not possible to do this heading justice in this short submission. The MUA believe that fatigue is a major contributor to the mental health of workers.

Fatigue is sleep deprivation to describe the inadequate quantity or quality of sleep. Every worker on a vessel suffers from this on every single rostered swing.

Sleep is as important to the human body and food and water. A sleepy fatigued person is prone to accidents, as their judgment is impaired. Being awake for 17-19 hours is like having a blood alcohol level of .05 and awake for 24 hours is the same as being .01.

Lack of sleep can affect the persons performance and be linked to the increased risk of mental health issue such as depression.

### Noise/vibration

Exposure to noise in our work environment causes a number of physiological and psychological responses. Workers on vessels are exposed to noise for four to five weeks at a time with no respite. Noise can:

- annoy and interfere with speech
- interfere with concentration and thought processes
- disturb sleep
- cause fatigue and aggression
- reduce immune response
- lead to heart disease.

Workers report having to wear their PPE for 12+ hours a day. Cooks and seafarers having to wear hearing protection to work, cook, eat and sleep in. For five weeks at a time.

Seafarers reporting that once off the vessel it still felt like their teeth rattled in their heads for days after coming off a noisy/vibrating vessel. Feeling increased irritability and even anger after prolonged exposure to noise. Often this feeling takes a long time to settle once workers return home.

Workers compensation data in Australia shows we have a growing problem of noise related injury. While some employer groups site ipod headphones as being the modern contributing cause, data of exists from the effects FIFO/DIDO workers experience in this regard.

### Heat

Our members are often going about their jobs in the North West through the most incredible hot conditions. Day in, day out for long swings on 12 + hour days. The body would be physically and mentally fatigued just in this environment alone.

As the temperature or heat burden increases, workers report feeling increasingly irritable, have loss of concentration and ability to do mental tasks. Production in the North West doesn't stop when it gets too hot. It is employer discretion as to when workers can call breaks.

### Alcohol

Alcohol is the mainstream excepted drug of choice. Since the increase of stricter drug and Alcohol testing and policies on site it appears that many workers have shifted to fast metabolising drugs like alcohol or speed. It is out of the system fast enough to be meet even the most rigorous drug and alcohol testing regime.

It is well know by the MUA particularly among young FIFO/DIDO workers that they binge drink on return home from a long swing away at work. It has become normal to hear workers say "got home

a few days ago and have been on a massive bender". This is reported much less by workers on week about rosters.

Airlines serve alcohol on flights home with breakfast. When asked why? The most common answer is "Oh many of these guys have been working away for four weeks; this is their first alcoholic drink".

### Drugs

MUA believe that we are almost forcing FIFO/DIDO workers to take something to cope with the outright fatigue of these long swings and hours. Over the counter drugs to stay awake and then to get to sleep. MUA believes that if drug testing results of FIFO/DIDO workers were looked at it would show they use a much greater rate of over the counter drugs than the broader population. Pain relief medications to help them "get through" the day.

The MUA has also seen the massive increase in caffeine based soft drinks used among workers. Some worksites even sell them in their lunch/crib room vending machines.

Workers report to the MUA of drinking up to ten cups of coffee in a day.

In three weeks during August and September 2014 the MUA assisted three members to attend a 30 day alcohol dry out program in NSW. Services like these in Western Australia the waiting list starts at three months. It's too little too late.

### Health culture in male dominated industry's

We know that the resource industry is male dominated. The maritime industry across Australia has female participation rates as low as 6%. Men's health statistics are the over represented gender for high suicide rates. This does not separate out the Resource industry.

Men don't talk until its severe or too late. Men carry out threats of suicide in far greater numbers than women. While this kind of research is widely known. We are doing nothing to target this more vulnerable group of FIFO/DIDO male dominated workers.

### Casual contract work

We know from studies that casual and contract work is major contributor of mental health issues and the high suicide rates in the construction industry. The Resource industry has very high casual and contract work. Ever increasing threat of losing jobs to 457 visa holders is real and tangible. It stands to reason this would be also an issue then in the mental health well being in the resource sector. Again we have no data or to link this information to FIFO workers.

### Here for a short time not a good time – the 5 year plan earn hard, fast and get out

Many workers talk about the three or five year plan. It is common place to hear workers say they are here for a short time not a (good) long time. Many willingly sign up to longer swings of 4:1 or 6:1 believing they only need to handle it for a short time or just "survive" the project duration. Earn the big money for the house deposit of pay of the car then back to regular jobs.

Many have absolutely no intention of staying FIFO/DIDO for any period of longevity. Many have no idea what the potential harm to their health is.

### Feeling isolated

Feeling alone and isolated is a very common complaint, especially if forms of communication are limited. Some employer's don't allow face book or other social media in order to allow families to stay in touch.

Apart from feeling isolated from family and friends at home, many of the workers who stay at camp accommodation in this industry, and even in these shared facilities they wouldn't know who was in the donger next to them.

### Business does not see mental health as an injury

Many employers will fight to the death to deny any responsibility for the psychological health and well-being of an employee. This is supported by the sheer number of stress related workers comp claims are denied or delayed from the onset. The MUA believes this would be 100% of stress claims.

Regardless of whether the stress injury comes from home or work the effect of it is still on the job. A stressed worker doesn't leave his or her stress at the gate, just as they cannot leave their broken leg there. Home stressors like sick children, death, moving house, relationship break downs occur to all of us. Just because the employer says you must be fit for work stressed out people are still on the job. We need to risk manage those human factors.

The employer has this over whelming notion that workers need to be fit for work... but yet nothing is said about how workers are sent home. How fit for home are we making our workforce?

### Poor diet

While most FIFO jobs provide meal some workplaces do not. Workers must work 12 hour days, split shifts for four weeks at a time and also find time to prepare healthy breakfasts, packed lunches and dinner. In the MUA's experience just does not occur. Many workers are just too tired or can't be bothered to shop let alone find time to prepare a good meal. Take always and quick fix snacks become the norm.

Also recently workers reported to the MUA that food standards had changed at a work camp due to cost cutting. A new food supplier won the contract due to under cutting. Cheaper processed food replaced the previous healthier options. Some flights in and out of Perth for FIFO have stopped providing meals to workers. Workers coming off night shift and going straight to the airport have to wait many hours until they can eat.

### Poor physical health

Some Vessels in particular larger ones do provided some gym or exercise equipment, some live in camps do as well. Many are too tired to use them, or just don't know how. Some company's do not provide any equipment at all because of the potential for workers to injure themselves on the "leisure" equipment.

Injuries do occur, but often because little or no training is provided, merely a few posters on the wall on how too. Workers have to be inducted on how to drive a forklift or operate machinery that could potentially cause harm so why exercise gyms aren't regarded the same is questionable.

#### Lack of support /access unions

Coupled with the feeling of isolation that workers do experience being away from family and home. They are also isolated from receiving assistance and help from their Unions. Many employers actively doing all they can to limit employees contact with getting union assistance.

Many workplaces have no support process's in place, at best most offer an Employee assistance program (EAP) which is a often a free call number. Like a crisis line. Studies have shown that men in particular will not use these services. Often workers tell us they do not trust the EAP will be kept confidential so won't use it.

#### **The current legislation, regulations, policies and practices for workplace mental health in Western Australia;**

This is an easy question to answer there is none, certainly not any which is proactive?

Workers compensation bar for stress or mental health related claims is to high, blame ridden and in most cases its actually more harmful to the all ready injured worker then it is ever helpful.

Occupational health and safety regulation is totally reactive.

Whilst at the moment Western Australian has a code of practice into working hours it still is so weak, that it allows workers to have six week swings of 12 hour + days with only one week off. It does not place a single extra enforceable burden on the employer to manage the considerable risk associated with these unbelievable rosters.

In addition to this if Western Australian adopt the new harmonised laws in the next few years, it will come under Safe Work Australia's now watered down version of a guidance note. This legislation limits even further the workers' rights to have access to other support services like Unions.

Any requirement to provide education and lifestyle information to workers under all current legislation is limited to the company's will and knowledge. In reality it does not happen. Employers will always take the stance of expecting a worker to be fit for the job.

Discrimination regarding mental health issues occurs frequently. Workers don't want to report issues regarding mental health concerns or problems because they fear for their future employment prospects. It is the MUAs experience that workers who are repatriated off vessels for having a life crisis or mental health issue and are casual just never go back. Employers simply say "not fit for work in this industry"

We still don't talk about mental health or suicide in the media, so how can we expect employers to handle it any better? Workers will often say they don't want to offend someone by asking them if they are ok. Nor do they know how to ask or what to do if they did,

## **Current initiatives by government, industry and community, and recommend improvements.**

### **Research needs to be done**

There is a multitude of research on each of the issues the MUA raises as contributing factors, and the effect each can have on the individual. Yet none exists on the combination of these which applies to our WA workforce in the resource and offshore industry. Particularly given the extraordinary rates of FIFO work being carried out in this state.

A study into the long term effects on FIFO/DIDO workers is crucial we need to know the extent of the problems. Study into sleep and resulting fatigue of workers is sincerely needed. Qualitative research into the families and support groups like Unions as to what they are experiencing at work and by their partners.

Which swing rotation are working better to reduce fatigue and work stress? Comparative study between long and short swing rotation is critical. Then put the data out there for employers and employees to understand and therefore give the workforce the chance to be educated and informed as to their choices.

### **Mates in construction**

A great concept and idea. A Joint initiative with Employers and workers and their Union the CFMEU. Every single employee receives, very basic training regarding mental health and mental health first aid. Extra training is also given to health and safety representatives and Union delegates then higher again to financially in control managers within the organisation.

### **Better rosters equal time**

The Government should look at practices around Australia and internationally (such as Norway). What is regarded as best practice and legislate this as the minimum standard. Equal time rosters do exist in WA, fire fighters, and Ambulance officers what are the conclusions we can draw from them?

### **Compulsory private communication facilities**

This should be legislated as compulsory. No different to providing personal protective equipment to a worker. It should be seen as protective equipment for reducing mental health and stress injuries.

No worker should ever be denied the right to communicate regularly and effectively with home and support services.

### **Inductions and education to be extended to families**

Workplace mental health and site inductions should be offered to the families of workers. Programs like this used to be part of the normal employment process for some mine sites when the whole family moved to the community near the Mine. FIFO/DIDO work appears to have stopped this process from happening. Families would attend at some stage through the employment process to

see what the new employees would be doing and where. It helped make the family be informed, included and increased understanding which led to a more supportive home environment.

### **Improve skills training and make apprentices compulsory of any new construction project**

Often employers report to the MUA that a reason for running workers at high levels of production (fatigue) is that they do not have the skilled workforce required to do the job within the time constraints of the contract.

One worksite familiar to the MUA for example, had only three trained crane operators. So when one was injured it left two operators for a nine day 24 hour unload. On day three when one of the crane drivers reported fatigue only four hours into a shift he was told that there was no one trained to replace him and to keep going. He was a casual employee so kept going. Other employees contacted the Union. The MUA intervened and the company flew two additional operators down from Darwin to relieve him for the duration of the contract.

This same company have not trained a single crane operator in over three years. For every new major project it should be mandatory to provide method of training, up skilling or take on apprentice(s). Perhaps a percentage of profit is required to go to training. Or a balance as per the number of skilled workers required then a percentage of training should be provided.

Companies who steal trainees or recently graduated apprentices etc should be made to compensate in part or whole the employer who trained them.

Any company which is not Australian registered (ie every shipping company working in Australia) should be required by law to train at a greater extent than Australian registered companies.

Any company who applies for 457 visa (or equivalent) workers should be required to take on a ratio balance of trainees. Either to up skill or take on new apprentices for the duration of the 457 visa requirement.

### **Encourage more women into the industry**

This Industry does little or nothing to improve the number of women in the workforce. Women only represent approx 6% of the maritime industry nationally and this is believed to be even lower in Western Australia. This is an untapped skilled and willing resource we are not doing enough to engage.

### **In conclusion**

The MUA thanks the committee and looks forward to the finding into this inquiry.

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## Reading and research papers

Lifeline WA FIFO/DIDO Mental health Research report 2013. Prepared by the Sellenger Centre for research in Law, Justice and Social change at Edith Cowan University. Principal contributors Assoc Prof Pamela Henry, Dr Karine Hamilton, Stuart Watson and Nicole Macdonald.

Beyond blue Submission Into the inquiry into the use of Fly in Fly out (FIFO) workforce practices in regional Australia. Sep 2012

Australian Government; Australian Institute of Family studies; Report on Fly –in Fly-out workforce practices in Australia: The effects on children and family relationships

Roadshow report: Toughness in the workplace. Prepared for the Resources Safety division Department of Mines and Petroleum (WA) Jan 2011 by Dr Dean Laplonge (Factive)

Development of a fatigue/risk index for shiftworkers. Research report prepared by QuinetQ Centre for Human Sciences & Simon Folkard Associates Limited for the Health & Safety Executive (UK)

Estimating the circadian rhythm in the risk of occupational injuries and accidents. Paper prepared by Simon Folkard, David A Lombardi and Mick B Spencer for the 17<sup>th</sup> International symposium on shiftwork and working time. The Netherlands 2005

Fatigue: Prevention in the workplace. Work safe Victoria

Code of practice; Working Hours 2006 Worksafe WA and MIAC