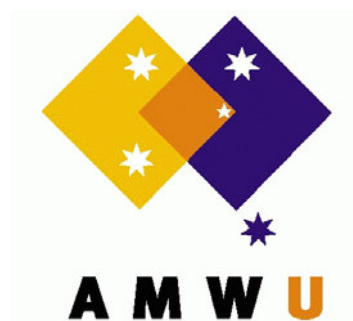


AUSTRALIAN MANUFACTURING WORKERS' UNION



Submission to the Inquiry into Fly in, Fly out and other long distance commuting work practices in regional Queensland

May 2015

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 FIFO work practices place significant pressures on individual workers, their families and the wider community. This submission focuses on the mental health impacts on individual workers and their families and also the community impact of 100% FIFO work practices.
- 1.2 The nature of the FIFO employment relationship makes employees uniquely vulnerable to their Employers. Employers are increasingly offering employment on a 100% FIFO basis. This means that where FIFO work was previously seen as a lifestyle option, it is now a decision made out of necessity.
- 1.3 Isolation, lack of communication, long shift lengths, long roster cycles and family disruption create higher risks for anxiety and depression for FIFO workers. This combined with the stigma around mental health issues and a reluctance to seek assistance means that employees are at a high risk of mental health injury and illness. The AMWU believes that the mental health impact on employees should be considered a health and safety issue and FIFO workers should be protected against work practises that endanger their mental health.
- 1.4 Further, whilst it may provide employment opportunities for workers in metropolitan areas, 100% FIFO work practices come at the expense of local workers in regional areas. It is the AMWU's view that 100% FIFO practice is unsupportive of individuals, families and regional communities. Efforts should be made to curb this practice to restore balance and choice to workers and a fair opportunity for regional communities to remain sustainable.
- 1.5 The AMWU calls for the State Government to give workers and the community more choice – including the choice to relocate their families to reduce the risks associated with FIFO work and to help sustain regional communities.

2. INTRODUCTION

Our members

- 2.1 This submission is made on behalf of members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union ("AMWU") in the Queensland/Northern Territory Branch. The AMWU, as known on a collective and public basis, is made up of the Automotive, Metals, Engineering, Printing and Kindred Industries Industrial Union of Employees, Queensland (the state registered Union) and the Automotive, Food, Metals, Engineering, Printing and Kindred Industries Union" known as the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) (the federal registered Union).
- 2.2 The AMWU represents over 110,000 members working across major sectors of the Australian economy, including in the manufacturing sectors of vehicle building and parts supply, engineering, printing and paper products. Our members are engaged in maintenance services work across all industry sectors. We cover many employees throughout the resources sector, mining, aviation, aerospace and building and construction industries. We also cover members in the technical and supervisory occupations in engineering and across diverse industries including food technology and construction. The AMWU has members at all skills/classification from entry level to degree. The AMWU

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Queensland/NT Branch represents over 17,000 members, with the vast majority employed in Queensland.

Issues for consideration in this submission

- 2.3 The AMWU's purpose is to improve members' entitlements and conditions at work. The protection of workers injured or made ill as a result of their employment is a fundamentally held principle our Union. The AMWU has also campaigned for a better and fairer Australia, with a focus on improving our community for everyone.
- 2.4 The AMWU welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. In this submission, the AMWU has focused on the human face of FIFO work practices. Our submission focuses on the following issues, that the Committee has been requested to consider:
- (a) The health impacts of workers and their families from long, distance community, in particular the mental health impacts on workers; and
 - (b) The effect of a 100% non-resident FIFO workforce on established communities.
- 2.5 The majority of AMWU members effected by FIFO work arrangements and other long distance commuting work practices across Queensland, work in the mining and construction sectors. For the purposes of this submission where reference is made to FIFO, it includes fly in fly out, drive in, drive out and other long distance commuting work practices.

Past federal and state inquiries

- 2.6 The AMWU notes that there have been a number of inquiries at the federal and state level into FIFO work practices. Most recently, in 2013 the Federal House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia held an inquiry into the use of 'fly-in fly-out' (FIFO) workforce practices in regional Australia (**the Federal Inquiry**). The 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*", was tabled on 13 February 2013.¹ The AMWU made a submission to that inquiry.²
- 2.7 The AMWU also notes that the Education and Health Standing Committee of the Western Australian Legislative Assembly is currently conducting an inquiry into the mental health impacts of FIFO work arrangements (**the WA Inquiry**). The Western Australian branch of the AMWU made a submission to that inquiry and the submission is referred to below.³
- 2.8 It is a concern for our members that despite the number of inquiries at the federal and state level, AMWU members and the wider community continue to suffer the adverse effects of FIFO and DIDO work arrangements.

¹ *Cancer of the bush or salvation for our cities? Fly-in, Fly-out and drive-in, drive-out workforce Practices in Regional Australia*, 2013 para [4.34]

² Submission of the AMWU to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australian inquiry into the use of 'fly-in fly-out' (FIFO) and drive-in, drive-out (DIDO) workers in regional Australia, October 2011.

³ Submission of the AMWU 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.

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Submission by the QCU

- 2.9 Finally, the AMWU notes that the Queensland Council of Unions (“QCU”), of which the AMWU is an affiliate, will also make a submission to this Inquiry. The AMWU supports and adopts the submission made by the QCU. Accordingly, we ask that this submission be read in conjunction with the submission made by the QCU.

3. THE FIFO EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP

- 3.1 The AMWU believes it is important to recognise the unique nature of the FIFO work arrangement in order to fully appreciate the impact these practices have on the lives of workers and their families.

The FIFO labour model

- 3.2 FIFO work practices have emerged since the early 1980s to provide a solution to the remoteness of mining resources. Rather than develop communities around mining deposits where employees are encouraged to relocate their families to locations where work is available, Employers began establishing a portable workforce maintained by individual employees flown into remote areas and housed in temporary camps. Now FIFO practices are the default labour force model for Australian resource development.
- 3.3 The FIFO employment relationship means that employees are highly dependent on their employer, not only for their income but also for their health and wellbeing. As stated in the WA Inquiry submission:

“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.”⁴

- 3.4 A worker engaged on a four week on, one week off roster, as is the norm in the construction industry, means that a worker will be under the control of their employer for approximately 292 days of the year.
- 3.5 The AMWU has been involved in disputes where Employers, particularly contractors, purport they cannot effect change in food and accommodation services because that work has been contracted out to a third party service provider. Our members have reported that complaints have been ignored and the handling of complaints has been used as part of disciplinary action against workers who raise legitimate concerns about the quality of accommodation and food. In one dispute Employees complained of uncooked chicken and bed bugs and their complaints were not adequately addressed. The AMWU was forced to progress the matter to the Fair Work Commission in order to have these basic needs met.
- 3.6 The AMWU believes Employers of FIFO workers have a greater obligation to consider the ways FIFO work practices effect employees and their families. As stated in the WA Inquiry submission:

⁴ Above n 4, page 2

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“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.”⁵

A lifestyle choice?

- 3.7 To speak generally of FIFO work arrangements is to oversimplify the experiences of our members. Many AMWU members report to us that the practice suits them and their lifestyle. However, it is undeniably the case that a significant number of AMWU members report that they are not on FIFO work arrangements by choice and continue to face the damaging impacts of this practice both at an individual and community level.
- 3.8 As the mining downturn continues, and manufacturing in metropolitan areas contracts, alternative work in the metropolitan areas for the kinds of classifications engaged by our members is limited. Where FIFO work was previously seen as a lifestyle option, it is now a decision made out of necessity.

A lack of data

- 3.9 Finally, the lack of data in relation to FIFO workers is a problem which has not yet been addressed by earlier inquiries. The AMWU WA Branch, in its submission to the WA Inquiry summarised this point as follows:

“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 number 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

4. MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS

A higher risk of injury

- 4.1 Protections for workers injured or made ill as a result of their employment is a fundamentally held principle our Union. FIFO and DIDO work arrangements regrettably result in a high incidence of accident and illness.
- 4.2 The FIFO lifestyle can carry with it adverse consequences such as relationship breakdown, violence, drug and alcohol abuse. Isolation, lack of communication, long shift lengths, long roster cycles and family disruption create higher risks for anxiety and depression.

⁵ Above n 4, page 3

⁶ Above n 4, page 3

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4.3 The Federal Inquiry revealed the health impacts on FIFO workers to be as follows:

- (a) Use of alcohol and other drugs;
- (b) Poor diet and physical inactivity;
- (c) Increased sexually transmitted diseases and blood borne infections;
- (d) Mental health issues;
- (e) Fatigue related injury;
- (f) In increase in injury related to high-risk behaviour.⁷

Barriers to seeking assistance

4.4 It is the experience of our members that mental health impacts of FIFO work are underreported and workers suffering from mental health issues are not adequately supported by their Employers or the wider community.

4.5 AMWU members report that the stigma attached to mental health issues continues to act as a barrier to reporting and treating these issues. 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 coping strategies are more prevalent in a workforce containing over 80 per cent male workers.⁸

4.6 Further, a number of our members report that they don't seek help when they are struggling with a mental health issues because they fear negative impacts on future employment opportunities. This is extremely concerning, especially in the context of FIFO workers' reliance on Employers for mental health support while 'on swing'.

4.7 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.

4.8 While the AMWU concedes that Employers do make mental health services available to employees via employee assistance programs, it is our submission that the provision of services in itself is not adequate to combat the impact of FIFO work.

FIFO roster arrangements

4.9 We believe long rosters exacerbate the main causes of stress for FIFO workers. Factors which contribute to mental health issues, which are directly relevant to rostering include:

- (a) Length of time away from family;
- (b) Missing out on key life events;

⁷ Cancer of the bush or salvation for our cities? Para [4.34]

⁸ 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

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- (c) Isolation and remoteness;
- (d) Boredom in camp;
- (e) Poor telecommunications; and
- (f) Adjustment between home and work.

4.10 The AMWU WA Branch, in its submission to the WA Inquiry stated:

“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.”

4.11 The issue of roster length is dealt with as an industrial issue as part of Enterprise Bargaining negotiations. However, we submit, as the AMWU WA branch submitted to the WA Inquiry, 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.

SUBMISSION

The mental health impact on employees should be considered a health and safety issue with legislative minimum standards for rosters and strengthening of protections for workers suffering from mental health injuries.

5. IMPACT ON REGIONAL COMMUNITIES

- 5.1 The AMWU is particularly concerned by the growing trend in 100% FIFO workforces which adversely affect regional communities and individual employees who are forced into FIFO work arrangements contrary to the best interest of themselves and their families.
- 5.2 Workers engaged on a FIFO basis only are not afforded the option to relocate their families and are forced into FIFO work arrangements where it may suit the worker, their family and the regional community for permanent relocation to occur. The AMWU draws on two case studies of the negative impacts of 100% FIFO work arrangements in regional communities.
- 5.3 The first cases study details the experiences of an AMWU member living in Moranbah, Queensland. Moranbah is located inland between Mackay and Clermont and services a number of coal mines. At the height of the mining boom the town was stretched to breaking point and house prices soared. However, in October 2014 the housing market in Moranbah collapsed.

Case study 1 - Moranbah

The AMWU offers the case study of an AMWU member. He has spent his life in regional Queensland. He grew up in Moura and moved to Moranbah in the mid-1980s to work at the nearby mine, where he still works.

When he first started work he was placed in single quarter camp accommodation. At that time the vast majority of workers, some 110, were single and without family responsibilities. When he decided to get married and start a family in the early 1990s he

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approached his Employer who enabled him to move in a company subsidised house in Moranbah with his partner.

Of camp accommodation, he says 'It definitely suits single people better, I was lucky and had the opportunity to leave camp accommodation to start a family. By moving into a house I was able to maintain that work/life balance. I'm not sure I could have done that if I had stayed in the camp lifestyle'.

Through the 1990s the Company began selling off company owned houses and families would need to find their own accommodation, for which the Company would subsidise rent. Single Employees were offered camp accommodation. Investment into new infrastructure and housing by the Company has been limited.

For the last five years now the Company offers camp accommodation only to new employees. Employees are engaged on a 'commuter basis only'. Many workers travel from Mackay, Proserpine and even as far as Rockhampton and Townsville to come to work. These workers reside in the camps for the duration of their roster cycle and drive upwards of five hours home following a 12 hour shift.

There are many workers who would like to take up residence in Moranbah but this is not an option for them. The Company is reluctant to assist and house prices in Moranbah are prohibitively high. The Company has not built enough new houses to attract workers at the mine to relocate their families.

In the town of Moranbah, retail shops have closed down and fewer new families are relocating to the town.

Further, the number of apprentices engaged by the mine has drastically plummeted effecting young people's opportunity to take up a trade and secure employment.

Further, there are nearby mines within 30-50km from town where local workers are unable to secure work because the only work offered is FIFO work. This creates an absurd situation where people are better placed to secure jobs if they relocate out of nearby regional mining towns and into metropolitan areas.

Workers in nearby 100% FIFO work arrangements are not offered travel opportunities to travel into town. They are bussed straight from the airport to camp and back again. The town of Moranbah is not benefiting from workers on 100% FIFO work arrangements.

- 5.4 The AMWU provides the further case study of Middlemount, a town located 242 kilometres inland from Mackay and Rockhampton which services two coal mines, Foxleigh and German Creek.

Case study 2 - Middlemount

Similarly, in the regional town of Middlemount it once enjoyed the prosperity associated with nearby mine workers relocating to the area. There are four coal mines within thirty minutes of Middlemount: Middlemount Coal, German Creek, Lake Lindsay and Fox Leigh.

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Workers at these mines are predominantly engaged on FIFO work arrangements. Workers live in camp accommodation for the duration of their roster cycle and then return home to predominantly metropolitan areas.

There are local workers in the town of Middlemount who cannot secure work in the mines. They are overlooked by workers engaged on FIFO work arrangements and are forced to find work elsewhere, or to relocate permanently.

The town is suffering, school populations have declined, hotels and local retail businesses are suffering. The predominance of FIFO work arrangements means that money is not being spent in the town. The roster cycles do not allow time for the FIFO workers to spend time in the town.

FIFO workers are not afforded the opportunity to relocate their families to Middlemount. Further, as services and facilities decline, the town struggles to attract new families.

- 5.5 Another concern which has emerged out of the recent trend towards 100% FIFO work practices is employees falsifying their place of residence in order to secure jobs. The AMWU is aware of circumstances where workers travel considerable distances to high capacity airports such as Brisbane in order to satisfy the FIFO requirement to secure a position. In some cases employees travel to Brisbane in their own time only to fly back out to mines or other projects even in circumstances where a commute directly to the workplace is quicker. This absurdity arises from Employers who engage workers only on FIFO basis.
- 5.6 Aside from the obvious unnecessary financial expense from the Employer and the Employee, the fatigue risks associated with extra travel not known by the Employer poses even greater risks to workers in FIFO work arrangements. Again this problem arises out of a lack of option and a lack of employment opportunities in regional opportunities. There is no reason why Employers should impose 100% FIFO work arrangements in circumstances where suitable and qualified workers reside nearby.

SUBMISSION

It is the AMWU's view that 100% FIFO practice is unsupportive of individuals, families and regional communities. Efforts should be made to curb this practice to restore balance and choice to workers and a fair opportunity for regional communities to remain sustainable.

6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1 The AMWU welcomes the opportunity to meet with Inquiry members to advance the points raised within this submission. The AMWU also welcomes the opportunity to organise for the Inquiry to meet with members of our Union, with direct experience of the negative impacts of FIFO work arrangements, in particular 100% FIFO work arrangements.
- 6.2 The AMWU calls for State Government intervention to ensure that the inflexible practice of 100% FIFO work arrangements is stopped. What our members and regional communities are telling us is that they want workers to have choice – the choice to relocate their families to reduce the risks associated with FIFO work and to help sustain regional communities.

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Submission end.