

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia,

Inquiry into the use of 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) workforce practices in regional Australia

From Sally McGushin

My experience of FIFO/DIDO work practices is in the mining industry. I was married to a General Practitioner who lived and worked on the West Coast of Tasmania for 19 years 1988 – 2007, so am familiar with the mining workforce practices there; inevitably living in one mining community connects one to other mining communities throughout Australia. I have maintained those connections so am familiar with mining work practices throughout much of Australia.

- *Extent and projected growth in FIFO/DIDO.* In my experience the expansion of FIFO/DIDO in the mining industry has a direct correlation with the introduction of 12 hour shifts. When a worker who is employed for 12 hour shifts is "on shift" it can be very hard on the family. There is barely time for sleep and food let alone the family. Therefore there is a growing tendency for workers to locate their families in larger centres, where they perceive there to be the advantages of better services than they might find in an established smaller community near the workplace. The workers then FIFO/DIDO and hope to spend better "quality time" with their families when "off shift", and the family does not have the tension of having to tip toe around when the worker is "on shift". This relocation has a snowball effect because as families from the smaller established towns relocate the populations dwindle and so do the services. Consequently the "advantages" of better services offered by relocating to larger centres hold more appeal.
- *Costs and benefits.* The benefit for *companies* choosing FIFO/DIDO work practices as an alternative to a resident workforce is that it maximises the likelihood of a compliant, apathetic workforce. Different shifts will not know each other; meanwhile those who share the same shift will be too tired for meaningful communication whilst on shift; and of course they FO/DO to their respective homes at the end of shift. The main cost to a company is that it is likely to have a relatively young and inexperienced workforce as older, experienced workers burn out. The benefit to individuals is that they may be able to achieve a financial goal in a relatively short space of time. They may also enjoy longer periods of leisure that give them more flexibility to do things when off shift. The downside is that they are more likely to burn out because of the long working hours when on shift. This could have long term health problems for the individuals and their families. Furthermore FIFO/DIDO work for any length of time is destructive of family life, which will have other health and social costs to the worker. Moreover in so far as the family is the fabric of society it has destructive repercussions on society as a whole.

- *The effect of a non-resident FIFO/DIDO workforce on established communities:* the fact that non-resident FIFO/DIDO workers are known as seagulls sums up the situation. Seagulls fly in, they fly out and they leave their excrement all over the place. The fact is they contribute very little to the local economy. They tend to bring most of their personal items with them. They are not usually in a position to socialise or contribute to the social capital of the community. Their presence generates resentment in the established communities and this is exacerbated by incentives (perceived or actual) that are seen to be given to the non-resident workforce but are not offered to local workers. A resentful community is going to be unhappy and demoralised and generally less healthy.
- *Impact on communities sending large numbers of FIFO/DIDO workers to mine sites:* These communities will find themselves stretched as for the most part they will be bereft of the social capital that the absentee workforce would have supplied. This has an adverse effect on the health and well being of these communities as the workers are unable to play a regular integrated part of society and the community is weakened.
- *Long term strategies for economic diversification in towns with large FIFO/DIDO workforces:* this is the wrong question. The point is that large FIFO/DIDO workforces are not good for the health of any town whether they are the non-resident workforce in an established community or the absentee residents who work elsewhere.
- *Key skill sets:* The long term strategy should be to support a resident workforce, including providing local opportunities for training and development.
- *Provision of services, infrastructure and housing availability for FIFO/DIDO workforce employees:* in providing services, infrastructure and housing availability for FIFO/DIDO workforce, great care has to be taken not to create further problems in established resident communities, particularly if the FIFO/DIDO workforce are seen to be advantaged over and above the local community. It is much better to build up the local infrastructure e.g. health facilities, recreation, roads, water, sewerage, education, housing. A happy well supported community that does not feel as though it is being constantly used will be more accepting of some FIFO/DIDO. It may well be that the development of the community's infrastructure will encourage more workers to be resident, and that would be a positive move.

- *Strategies to optimise FIFO/DIDO experience for employees, their families, communities and industry:* The use of FIFO/DIDO as long term regular work practices is destructive to the employees, their families, the communities from which they are absent and (if applicable) the communities in which they form the non-resident workforce. Therefore the premise should not be to optimise the FIFO/DIDO experience; rather it should be to optimise opportunities for a resident workforce.
- *Potential opportunities for non mining communities with narrow economic bases to diversify their economic base by providing a FIFO/DIDO workforce:* Again the focus is wrong. The fact is that non mining communities with narrow economic bases will not diversify their economic base by providing a FIFO/DIDO workforce. It may bring some initial economic input into the community but ultimately it will be a strain on the community which will become increasingly dysfunctional.
- *Other related matters:* I draw the committee's attention to the eight hours day and the fact that we still celebrate its achievement throughout Australia. The importance of this achievement to the individual workers and the well being of the community as a whole is well documented. DIDO/FIFO as regular workpractices are the antithesis of all that was achieved in the struggle for the 8 hours day. Work/life balance is undermined for the individual workers and society as a whole. I would be happy to expand upon anything that I have written – either by phone or in person if the committee holds hearings in Tasmania.

*Sally McGushin*

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