Suicides highlight harsh conditions in Australia's mining industry

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Confronted by growing outrage among victim's families, the Western Australian state government last month announced a parliamentary inquiry into suicides among "Fly In Fly Out" (FIFO) workers in the mining industry in the state's northern Pilbara region.

Nine Pilbara workers have committed suicide in the past 12 months while living and working away from home, typically three weeks on, one week off. The most recent death occurred in early August at a resource project on Barrow Island. The victim's details have not been released.

The inquiry is a bid to bury calls by family members for an investigation into the causes of the deaths, including the lack of mental health resources for workers in the industry. The Labor Party opposition and the mining trade unions have joined hands with the Liberal state government in referring the tragedies to a parliamentary committee.

All of these parties share responsibility with the giant mining companies for the inhuman conditions of FIFO workers. The death toll has only continued since a 2011–13 federal parliamentary inquiry into the increasing prevalence of FIFO work in the mining industry, which tabled its report in February 2013.

Commissioned by the previous federal Labor government, with the backing of the unions, that committee issued 21 vague recommendations for various health and funding studies and reviews, and nominated 12 "action areas" for improvements by companies and governments, none of which has halted the growth of FIFO working, nor the suicide rate.

An estimated 50,000 workers are now employed on a FIFO basis in the Pilbara. They already make up the majority of the region's mining workforce, and that proportion is predicted to reach 83 percent by 2020.

Last month, the family of Rhys Connor, 25, who took his own life 12 months ago in his room at a Pilbara mine site camp, released details to the media of his suicide letter and a video interview he gave to a research crew investigating FIFO working conditions. The letter and interview highlighted the mental health issues affecting FIFO workers.

Connor, who had a young son, explained that many workers were struggling with depression, relationship breakdowns and boredom. He advised workers contemplating FIFO work: "Money's not everything if you're not happy. I wouldn't even bother going."

Connor's father, Peter Miller, told the media: "After a previous bout with depression while doing FIFO, Rhys sought help from the mental health system. He was let down. He went back to FIFO to finish a job and was then going to try again to seek more professional help. Rhys was scared he might lose his job if he spoke to anybody on site, as like most other workers they do not trust being able to talk to anybody on site."

Steven Migas, 36, a mining supervisor on a Fortescue Metals Group project near Port Hedland, killed himself last November. His brother John told reporters: "There is already enough evidence with the statistics to say that … with nine in the last year and there being 50,000 people up there, that's twice the suicide rate of the national rate. I think something needs to happen now … before more families have to suffer."

FIFO workers are flown in from all parts of Australia, or from overseas. Some work daily 12-hour shifts for four weeks before returning home for a week or so. They are housed in demountable huts ("dongas") in remote, often hot environments, isolated from families and friends. Many turn to alcohol and drugs to cope with the loneliness and boredom. The conditions take a heavy toll on family and personal relationships.

Fiona White-Hartig, a justice of the peace in the

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Pilbara town of Karratha told the media: “I would sign two, possibly three, divorce papers a week.”

In both Western Australia and Queensland, the country’s two main mining states, there are now more FIFO mining employees than long-term residents in mining towns. Two decades ago, many workers and their families resided in regional towns near mining projects.

The shift to FIFO employment accelerated after 1986, driven by the Hawke Labor government’s changes to the Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT). FBT exemptions allowed companies to offset their taxes against transportation, accommodation and catering spending for FIFO employees.

Governments and the companies turned away from the development of mining towns and associated social infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals, child care facilities, housing and recreational and cultural facilities.

The changes led to dramatic cost reductions for the companies. In a submission to the 2011–13 federal parliamentary inquiry, Fortescue Metals Group (FMG) manager Deidre Willmott stated: “On average it costs FMG $100,000 more to employ a person who lives in the Pilbara than to employ a person FIFO.” Willmott added that FMG would save $33 million a year if it replaced its 330 residential workers in Port Hedland with FIFO workers.

During the same inquiry, Rio Tinto warned governments against fiddling with the FIFO model. Rio Tinto flatly insisted that it was the government’s responsibility to deal with the side effects of FIFO, including housing shortages. Far from spending money to develop badly-needed social and physical infrastructure, however, governments at both the state and federal level are imposing austerity measures.

The Western Australian (WA) parliamentary committee’s terms of reference are confined to mental health, so that the underlying issues of the exploitation of FIFO workers will not be touched. Even so, the mining companies have rejected in advance any connection between FIFO working and suicides.

WA Chamber of Minerals and Energy chief executive Reg Howard-Smith said research had yet to “find any substantial evidence” to support “recent assertions that there may be a higher occurrence of mental health issues associated with FIFO employment.”

The three main mining trade unions, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the Electrical Trades Union and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), quickly endorsed the parliamentary inquiry. They welcomed it as another opportunity to cooperate closely with the employers and the government.

In a media release, CFMEU state secretary Mick Buchan stated: “Conducting this inquiry is an important step towards working together to improve the mental health and wellbeing of FIFO workers in WA.” Buchan referred to the “terrible loss of life” and said “the health and wellbeing of workers always has to come first,” but these words ring hollow.

The unions, alongside governments, are deeply implicated in creating the intolerable FIFO working and living conditions. Preoccupied with protecting the super profits of the mining companies and government tax revenues, they have jointly imposed decades of restructuring, facilitating the ever-greater use of contractors and FIFO crews.

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