AMWU members took their determination to save workers’ compensation to Canberra, urging Senators from all states not to undermine payments and protections for those injured. The Abbott Government wants big national employers to switch over to Comcare, threatening the collapse of the state schemes. In order to make the Comcare scheme appealing to the big national companies, the Federal Government is also proposing to slash benefits and access to compensation for those currently under the Comcare system e.g. Thales, Department of Defence, ANSTO, DSTO etc.

It was so cold in Canberra that Mr Goodluck had to change out of his Queenslander shorts. But all our AMWU delegates fired up once they arrived at Parliament House, getting pledges from Labor MPs and Senators Nick Xenophon and John Madigan to oppose the changes.

A Senate Committee has reviewed the Bills, publishing its results in June 2015. The Greens and ALP have committed to opposing the Bills. The LNP Senators dismissed the evidence opposing the Bill, saying that “at times, difficult decisions need to be taken”. Of course, the only people who these difficult decisions will affect will be injured workers – for example the proposal would slash the average payment for a permanent impairment from $37,000 to $8,000.

SA delegate Peter Hunter described the Canberra visit as “a motivating experience and I can see why it is important for delegates and members to take an active part.”

The Bill is scheduled to be discussed in the Senate in August, so it’s no too late to add your name to the Comcare petition and raise the issue with your Senator.

www.amwu.org.au/comcare_petition

THE IMPACT OF FIFO ON MENTAL HEALTH

“A Western Australian parliamentary committee investigating the mental health impact of fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) work has made 30 recommendations to improve the mental health and well being of FIFO workers.”

The Impact of FIFO Work Practices on Mental Health: Final Report found that FIFO workers are at significantly greater risk of suffering from mental health issues than their non FIFO colleagues.

Typical FIFO workers come from the group in society who are at highest risk of mental illness and suicide – males aged between 18 and 44. Three large studies have found mental illness is 50% more common in FIFO workers than the national average.

There are 60,000 FIFO workers in Western Australia — that’s approximately 240,000 people directly affected by FIFO work if each FIFO worker has three direct family members.

Of course, FIFO is not restricted to WA. The resource and construction industries use the FIFO work model in Queensland, Northern Territory and parts of NSW. In some cases, workers fly in and fly out to countries such as China or PNG. Some mines in Queensland are all FIFO with local workers having to fly to and from Brisbane as their point of engagement.

AMWU efforts to stall the Federal Government’s plan to destroy workers’ compensation. SEE BACK PAGE.
FIFO AND MENTAL HEALTH

The WA parliamentary committee heard evidence about how hard it is for FIFO workers to talk about and get help for mental health issues.

“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.”

“Many people still believe that there is too much stigma attached to discussing mental health with a professional. It defines 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 shore up family and loved ones.”

This is exacerbated by company drug and alcohol testing programs:

“In my experience people who admit to having mental health issues find it hard to keep a FIFO position because if they choose to take medication it cannot be detected and once it does the employer won’t have anything to do with them.”

The committee summarised the circumstances for FIFO workers as taking of an individual regularly away from home, putting him in isolation from his family and other social supports, subjecting him to fatigue and then controlling his life within the camp environment. Understandably, this can have a significant impact on emotional health and wellbeing.

The AMWU is heartened by the 30 recommendations made by the committee. The committee members clearly heard the evidence from workers. This is from an AMWU member:

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

The committee recognised that FIFO workers need assistance in dealing with the isolation from family and other social supports. The AMWU is campaigning for action on the recommendations which will help ease that burden. These include:

- encouraging family and worker friendly rosters such as even time or 8 days on 6 days off
- developing a FIFO Code of Practice which emphasises worker access to high quality and reliable communications technology
- minimisation of motelling accommodation practices and, where possible, its abolition. Motelling is where a worker has to change their living quarters each time they are at work
- improving communication technology in accommodation camps so that workers can Skype and talk directly with their families – especially children
- more peer support programs that are genuinely independent from the companies, such as Mates in Construction
- expanding the duty of care provisions under occupational health and safety legislation to cover incidents which occur within employer provided accommodation.

Although the Report is about improving the lives of FIFO workers, the committee did make comment that applies to all work related ill health:

"Arguments have been made that some individuals are more suited to FIFO work arrangements than others. The committee does not accept this suitability argument. If this argument is accepted as valid, it suggests that the solution to the ‘challenges’ posed by FIFO work practices is to screen for and recruit only those deemed suitable to handle those challenges. In the committee’s view, this logic is akin to saying that the solution to the challenge of working safely at heights is to employ only those with exceptional balance, rather than addressing safety risks by providing harnesses and safety railings."

LITTLE COMPENSATION FOR WORK RELATED CANCER

The Cancer Council of Western Australia estimates that only 8 per cent of workers with occupational cancers ever receive compensation. The Cancer Council says there are many possible reasons for this under-compensation, including:

- lack of awareness of occupational risk factors for cancer among workers and health professionals
- lack of awareness of the ability to claim compensation, or how to access compensation schemes
- inadequate recording of workers’ occupational history, which could help to identify possible exposure to carcinogens
- better awareness of other non-occupational risk factors for specific cancers. For example, lung cancer is more often caused by smoking, so workers may miss a link to on-the-job exposures such as wood dust, diesel and certain metals.

As the report notes, Australians should be able to carry out a day’s work without adding to their risk of cancer. Not all of the causes of cancer are known to science. But known carcinogens should, as much as possible, be removed from the workplace. Australian scientists have published a list of 38 agents – the majority of these could be removed from our work environments, eg diesel fumes. See the November 2014 It’s No Accident for an article on Lung Cancer and Welding Fumes.

If other AMWU HSIs on your site didn’t receive the 2015 AMWU health and safety booklet, then it’s likely their details were not updated. Ask your AMWU delegate to check.