

Rent-a-crowd guru

Burrup billionaire pays 'supporters' to picket

By GLENN CORDINGLEY
BILLIONAIRE Perth-based Indian businessman Pankaj Oswal rented a crowd to "defuse" protests surrounding his Pilbara fertiliser company Burrup Holdings.

The 12-strong mob wore white T-shirts praising the company — each collecting a healthy \$500 handout for just hanging around.

The exercise cost thousands of dollars.

But the PR company behind last weekend's stunt — which happened outside the venue where an Indian guru was speaking — tasted karma this week when they got found out.

The rent-a-crowd stood among a conga of protesters from Friends of Australian Rock Art.

They were staging a vigil outside a fenced-off marquee where India's most prominent guru Bhaishri Rameshbhai Oza conducted a series of spiritual seminars.

Mr Oswal and his wife Radhika are devotees of the visiting guru who is Hindu of the Year in India.

Burrup Fertilisers chairman Mr Oswal sponsored the event titled, A Celebration of Life.

The FARA group is against plans by Burrup Holdings to construct a \$600 million explosives plant next to its existing fertiliser operation on the Burrup Peninsula, less than 1km from heritage-listed rock art.

The director of public relations company NCS, Chris Codrington, admitted paying the ring-ins, who he said were a mixture of university students and actors.

He said they "tutored" and "exchanged" views with FARA members.

But FARA co-convenor and former Greens MLC Robin Chapple described them as "clueless".

"We were rather bemused by the process," Mr Chapple said.

"I went and told them we were not against industry, only the location of the proposed explosives plant.

"To our amusement they felt we were against industry and had no knowledge of what the issues we represent were about."

Mr Chapple said the rent-a-mob mingled with the protesters and rolled out a sign with the company logo reading "Creating jobs".

He said it was a peaceful gathering, "lending itself to theatre rather than drama".

"We did not see this as an affront, we just merely found it rather humorous for someone who has this degree of business acumen to feel it necessary to pay people," he said.

"This has backfired because it has given our cause more prominence."

Mr Codrington defended his decision.

"My view is this worked very well," he said.

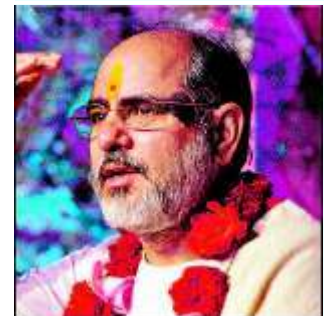
"Everyone got on famously other than a couple of very loud, raucous protesters.

"It defused the situation. In my view (the protesters) should not have been there in the first place because it was the wrong venue, the wrong occasion, totally the wrong forum and that's all I have to say on the matter."

Mr Codrington refused to say how the group was paid or deny that the payments were cash-in-hand.

The Oswals were keen for the guru to get a positive reception in Perth. They paid for a journalist and photographer from *The West Australian* to fly out to India to interview the guru before his Perth visit.

While in Perth, the guru blessed the Peppermint Grove block where the Oswals plan to build a \$70 million Indian-style palace.



FOR AND AGAINST: Pankaj Oswal's rent-a-crowd in white shirts stand in front of Burrup protesters at guru Bhaishri Rameshbhai Oza's seminars last week. TOP RIGHT: Bhaishri and Pankaj and Radhika Oswal.