

Industry link to leukaemia and cancer confirmed

Australian Workers Inquiry answers government challenge

Mike Head
7 April 1998

Following a challenge by a state government agency, the Workers Inquiry into the leukaemia and cancer crisis in the Australian steel city of Wollongong has issued comprehensive new figures confirming a close relationship between cancer and industrial pollution.

The results cover another steelmaking centre, Newcastle, 175 kilometres north of Sydney, where a government agency, the Hunter Public Health Unit, attempted to discredit the inquiry's findings. The new data, covering all areas within 25 km of the Newcastle steelworks, show that workers and their families living near the steel plant are eight times more likely to contract leukaemia and nearly four times more likely to contract other cancers than those living further than 20 km away.

In the neighborhood of Carrington, for example, approximately 2 km from the steelworks coke ovens, the leukaemia rate was 8.39 per 1,000 over 22 years and the cancer rate was 185.19. At Broadmeadow, some 4.5 km from the smokestacks, the rates were 6.37 and 137.64 respectively. By contrast, at West Wallsend, about 18 km away, the results were 0.99 and 48.75.

Some Newcastle inner-city areas, near the steelworks, had slightly lower rates than Carrington and Broadmeadow. Mayfield, for example, had a leukaemia rate of 3.24 and a cancer rate of 134.45. Nevertheless, these rates were still very high compared to outlying districts.

Overall, the results are staggering. They show that nearly one in five of those living nearest to the steel plant, owned by BHP, were diagnosed with cancer over a 22-year period. By contrast, at a distance from the plant's pollution, the rate was just one in twenty.

When charted in the form of a graph, the pattern of distribution shows a striking inverse square relationship between cancer and leukaemia rates and distance from the aging BHP complex. Such a radially symmetrical curve is compelling mathematical evidence linking cancer and leukaemia to a specific point source—the steelworks. For both the leukaemia and cancer results, there is a less than 1 percent possibility that this pattern is produced by chance.

The results confirm the Workers Inquiry's preliminary

analysis of the Newcastle data, released last November, based on an examination of 12 representative suburbs. They also support the Workers Inquiry's initial conclusion that smaller peaks of cancer and leukaemia exist in two other neighborhoods, one near a lead and zinc smelter, and another near a major aluminum smelter.

These patterns have existed for at least two decades, undetected or deliberately ignored by successive governments and their health authorities. The statistics cover the years 1972 to 1994. They were compiled from figures finally obtained from the state of New South Wales Cancer Registry after a campaign by the Workers Inquiry. For years, the NSW Cancer Council had withheld the data from independent researchers.

Health Unit exposed

These results are a devastating answer to attempts by the NSW Labor government's Hunter Public Health Unit to undermine the credibility of the Workers Inquiry. On January 11 of this year, without any attempt to clarify its allegations with the Workers Inquiry, the Health Unit issued a statement denying any evidence of increased cancer rates around heavy industry. It accused the Workers Inquiry of giving a "false impression."

The Unit's director, Dr. Craig Dalton, went even further in comments splashed all over the front page of the local daily, the *Newcastle Herald*. He charged the Workers Inquiry with compiling data selectively. "They appear to have selected the areas which favoured their theory," he said. "This distorts the findings and makes the research totally misleading."

In order to set the record straight, and alert Newcastle residents to the true situation, the Workers Inquiry has completed its preliminary analysis, adding the remaining 21 suburban areas in the region to the 12 initially examined. The results are irrefutable proof of a definite relationship between cancer rates and proximity to heavy industry. They will

withstand any scientific challenge.

They also throw a big question mark over the methods used by the Health Unit. Its response to the information provided by the Workers Inquiry was not to mount an investigation into the area's high cancer rates, conduct a proper health survey or probe the links to the region's major sources of industrial pollution. Instead, the Health Unit's concern was that the Workers Inquiry's statistics, given considerable publicity in the local media, would generate concern and outrage among working class families throughout the region, where many had tried in vain to force government authorities to conduct serious investigations into high incidences of cancer and other diseases.

Even the NSW Cancer Council, another state government-funded agency, has admitted that the Health Unit's material attacking the Workers Inquiry was "not conclusive." It proposed to conduct its own research into the link between industry and cancer in Newcastle, Wollongong and Sydney. However, it said the research would take several years and would be dependent on funding. Who would fund such research? The state or federal governments? BHP perhaps?

The Workers Inquiry

These questions are highly pertinent after the Workers Inquiry laid bare the cover-up carried out by the state government of the extraordinary rate of leukaemia and lymphoma among young people living near BHP's Wollongong steelworks, 80 km south of Sydney. The Workers Inquiry was initiated by the Socialist Equality Party in 1996 to provide a vehicle for ordinary working people to establish the truth behind the deaths of eight teenagers and young adults, and a rate of leukaemia in southern Wollongong at least 14 times the state average.

Whereas in Newcastle the Workers Inquiry merely released statistics it had obtained on local cancer and leukaemia rates, in Wollongong a full 10-month investigation was conducted, culminating in a two-day public hearing last July, and the release last September of a detailed report and recommendations by the six Workers Inquiry commissioners.

Not only did the Workers Inquiry find a definite industry-related pattern of cancer in Wollongong, it produced a wide range of compelling evidence from victims, workers, residents, nurses and a doctor that the BHP steelworks, the nearby Port Kembla copper smelter and other heavy industries were directly responsible for terrible concentrations of leukaemia, cancer, birth defects and other health problems.

Among the scores of witnesses were the families of several of the young victims. Their testimony revealed that if it had not been for the persistent efforts of Melissa Cristiano, a 20-year-old leukaemia victim, the state Labor government and the

Illawarra Public Health Unit would have suppressed all public information about the leukaemia crisis.

The Workers Inquiry further established that the investigation finally set up by the Labor government was designed to reach two predetermined conclusions, stated in advance by Health Minister Andrew Refshauge—that the causes of the leukaemia deaths were a mystery that would never be known, and that BHP's emissions of benzene and other carcinogens were not responsible.

Moreover, the Workers Inquiry revealed that BHP itself funded key parts of the government's report, sat on the supervising steering committee and supplied the estimates of its own past benzene pollution, upon which the entire Health Unit report hinged.

When the six Workers Inquiry commissioners released their findings, they challenged BHP, the Illawarra Health Unit and the government to refute, or in any way dispute, their analysis or conclusions. Not one of them responded. Any attempted reply would have thrown a further spotlight on their own cover-up.

Now the exposure of the Hunter Health Unit's smears has further illustrated the fact that governments and government agencies will go to great lengths to prevent the working class from probing the responsibility of big business for chronic health problems.

In its findings, published as *Cancer and Industrial Pollution*, the Workers Inquiry issued 15 detailed recommendations for immediate action to halt industrial pollution's threat to human health and to make companies like BHP pay for their damage. All the recommendations were based on the fundamental socialist principle that the lives, health and needs of ordinary people must take precedence over the requirements of private profit.

The findings emphasized that these essential measures could only be achieved through an independent struggle by working people, organized outside the structures of the government, the official agencies and the Labor Party and trade union apparatus. The unraveling of the Hunter Public Health Unit's slurs has reinforced that conclusion.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact