Workers and farmers in Australia outraged by toxic dump

Margaret Rees
3 June 1998

A decision by a state government in Australia to allow one of the country's largest companies to build a toxic dump in a farming area adjacent to a major working class suburb has caused outrage. On May 4 more than 12,000 workers, youth, retired people, small farmers and middle class residents attended a protest meeting after the government in Victoria authorised mining and construction materials giant CSR to proceed with its planned dump near Werribee, in Melbourne's western suburbs.

As a result of the go-ahead given by Premier Jeff Kennett's Liberal Party administration, many young families with children face contamination of the air, soil and water; and market gardeners, who grow 60 percent of the Victoria's green leaf vegetables at nearby Werribee South, fear that the dump will poison the water for their irrigation systems.

Sited in a former basalt quarry mined under licence by CSR-Readymix, the facility will be filled with up to 1.4 million tonnes of prescribed wastes (of which 38 percent will be contaminated soils) over 13 years. Prescribed waste is classified as "hazardous" and "toxic".

CSR will tip potentially cancer-causing chemicals such as chromium oxide, cadmium, cadmium acetate, arsenic, arsenic acid, beryllium and beryllium chloride, as well as other toxic substances, including chromium nitrate, copper cyanide, thallium, nickel sulphate, mercury, vanadium, barium, asbestos and zinc chloride.

The dump will contain "cells" of about a hectare each, to be filled one by one. Each cell will be lined with a double clay base divided by a thin drainage layer of gravel, then topped with plastic and a thick layer of gravel.

Many studies into this type of storage show that chemical leaks are inevitable. One 1992 study by Geoservices in the United States, proved that for a 10-acre landfill with the best possible clay liner, the leakage would be 90 gallons a day, or 328,000 gallons per year.

CSR admits that there will be leakage of 21 million litres in the first 15 years of storage at Werribee, even without taking into account external pressures, such as tree roots, burrowing animals or soil movements breaking the liners. Leaking chemicals will continuously seep into the groundwater.

In the US, many local studies have shown the dangerous public health consequences of such leakages. In Pitman, New Jersey, toxic dumps led to excessive rates of leukaemia among adults. In Hardemann County, Tennessee, adults living near a toxic dump suffered enlargement of the liver, and produced abnormal liver function results.

CSR, a former sugar refining company now also involved in building materials, mining, cement and timber milling, has a poor record. In 1996 its timber mill at Dartmoor, near the Victorian-South Australian border, leaked 6,300 litres of a poisonous arsenic compound from a mixing tank into the town's water supply.

At the Werribee protest meeting, many people expressed their hostility to CSR's plans. Mary Holland said Lloyds of London had lost a fortune insuring toxic dumps in the United States. Sharon Heggitty said one dump in Britain had caused 70 out of 100 people in one street to contract malignant cancer over a 10 year period.

Werribee Residents Against the Toxic Dump (WRATD) which organised the meeting, has spent two years campaigning, lobbying and writing submissions against the proposed dump. Its leaders handed the platform over to the opposition Labor Party, with its

© World Socialist Web Site

state leader John Brumby as the main speaker.

Labor Party members distributed a document called "Putting the Community First," promoting the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) as a neutral watchdog that would provide a last line of defence against CSR's plans. In 1986-87 the former Labor government in Victoria established the EPA's "limited regulatory regime" that allowed industry to do what it liked.

This is borne out in the case of CSR itself. At the Werribee quarry it was allowed a very high discharge allowance but still continually breached license requirements. From 1982 to 1996 the company recorded 30 breaches in 104 readings. In none of these cases did CSR even bother to inform the EPA. In 1992 an EPA reporting officer recommended a more stringent licence for CSR but the EPA hierarchy ignored the recommendation.

WRATD leaders invited Brumby to speak despite considerable distrust of the Labor Party and the entire parliamentary framework — distrust that erupted in the meeting itself. Brumby stated that the EPA would have the means to ensure industry compliance, but he was silent on Labor's record in office, and gave no commitment to shut down the dump. Towards the end of the meeting, a small farmer angrily challenged Brumby to say whether he would stop the dump. Another person asked a similar question. Shouts came from sections of the crowd: "Why don't you answer us John?"

Booing and jeering broke out when Brumby initially sought to avoid answering the question, pleading, "if we are elected, and the dump is in place, we will give the EPA real teeth". He was only able to regain control by pledging to introduce legislation to prevent further waste dumps.

Workers should place no faith in such promises. A Labor government will continue to implement the demands of the major companies for cheap toxic dumps. And not only will the EPA rubberstamp the Kennett government's decision, but a Labor government will never reverse the decision.

In the neighbouring state of New South Wales, the Labor government headed by Premier Bob Carr, backed by that state's EPA, in 1996 gave the go-ahead for a reopened copper smelter in Wollongong even though many young people in the local area had died of leukaemia. Moreover the Carr government introduced special last-minute legislation, supported by the Liberals, to block a resident's court challenge to its decision.

The implications of that decision and the government's cover-up of the leukeamia deaths, were drawn out by the Workers Inquiry into the Wollongong Leukaemia and Cancer Crisis, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party. The inquiry's findings, *Cancer and Industrial Pollution*, concluded that the lives and health of working people could only be protected "through an independent struggle, organised outside the structure of the government, the official agencies and the Labor and trade union apparatus".

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site