

Workers and residents in Western Australia suffer health problems from Alcoa's alumina plant

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In a report to shareholders published in February 1998, the chairman of the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) Paul H. O'Neill declared that his corporation sought to take a leadership role on environmental issues. "We believe economic growth and a sustainable environment are compatible and necessary objectives," he enthused. More recently, O'Neill avowed "we are environmentalists first and industrialists second."

But these claims have been brought into question by serious health problems that have emerged at the Alcoa plant in the southwest Australian town of Wagerup, as well as among residents in the areas surrounding the plant.

Alcoa, the world's biggest producer of alumina, has operations in 250 locations spread across 30 countries. Its three refineries in Western Australia (Kwinana, south of Perth, and Pinjarra and Wagerup in the southwest) are the largest in the world, producing 6.7 million tonnes of alumina per year.

In 1996, Alcoa commissioned a liquor burning plant at its Wagerup refinery, for the purpose of burning off combustible organic carbon compounds contained in bauxite for the production of alumina. Since the introduction of the plant, hundreds of complaints have been made to the company and government agencies from Alcoa workers and from residents in the neighboring towns of Yarloop and Waroona.

Concerns had previously been raised about Alcoa's only other liquor burning plant in Kwinana. Investigators discovered that the dust emitted was much like residue dust or caustic mist, irritating the eyes, nose, throat and lungs. Workers had also raised fears about the potential damage of known emissions such as carbon monoxide and benzene—a category A carcinogen—and volatile organic compounds formed by a complex mixture of over 200 different chemicals.

Nevertheless, the company gave assurances that the Wagerup facility contained state of the art technology, which had been tested at Kwinana for several years.

Since the new liquor burner came into operation, over 200 complaints of health problems have been lodged by plant workers, and 100 by local residents.

According to a report commissioned jointly by the Wagerup Community Health Awareness Group and the Australian Manufacturers Workers Union initial symptoms have included irritations of the nose, throat and eyes, chest tightness and pain, palpitations, nausea, a burning sensation to throat and chest, sinus pain, bleeding from the throat and a metallic taste constantly coating the mouth.

Among the longer term symptoms have been insomnia, multiple

chemical sensitivity, dizziness, reduced concentration and memory, skin rashes, lethargy, fatigue, diarrhea, muscle weakness and joint pains, visual disturbance and constant flu like symptoms.

One of the most serious cases concerns a former contract worker who worked on the liquor burning plant's construction and its ongoing maintenance.

Ian Grant, a 41-year-old father of four children, began work at the Wagerup plant as a contractor employed by Asea Brown Boveri (ABB). Grant, from the nearby town of Mandurah, west of Wagerup, was also a shop steward/workers delegate with the Australian Metal Workers Union (AMWU).

Grant spoke to the WWSW about his experiences at the facility.

"In 1997 ABB took over maintenance work at the plant after Alcoa sacked their maintenance, construction and safety workers and put the contracts out for tender. We were never given proper breathing apparatus. When we complained about the conditions we were told to keep our mouths shut as the contractor (ABB) didn't want to upset Alcoa. At one point the southwest manager of ABB came down after a major accident and told us the next one to get injured or stuff up would be personally run off the site by him.

"I began to start feeling sick around September 1997. It was like I was waking up every day with a really bad hangover. I was losing energy and could not sleep. I went to a doctor in my local area who told me I was just suffering from a virus. I told him that I worked at Alcoa and could it be anything to do with that. He told me there were 2,000 people working out there and he hadn't seen any other Alcoa workers.

"About 4 weeks later I developed a mouthful of ulcers. I was getting sicker every day. I had a constant metallic taste in my mouth. I went back to the doctor who dismissed it as something connected to the virus. I then had three weeks off at Christmas that year and my health started to improve and I was feeling a lot better.

"Then I went back to work. After a fortnight I collapsed in a big heap and that was the end of me. My kidneys gave up. I went to a doctor twice early in January 1998 after my lungs started bleeding again. I was losing literally cupfuls of blood. The doctor sent me to a lung specialist who took some blood samples. He had it analysed and the results came back and he did not know what the hell was going on. He had not seen anything like it before.

"I was sent to Royal Perth Hospital to have a bronchoscopy test. I ended up in the renal unit suffering from kidney failure. It was quite a shock. I'm now on a dialysis machine three times a week. I was diagnosed with an illness called Goodpastures disease (a disease

affecting the body's auto immune system, which is particularly damaging to the lungs, kidneys and other organs).

"I know there were a number of other workers who went down sick. Many were sick for over 6 months and went to numerous doctors trying to find out what was wrong. Most had constant throat infections and flu like symptoms. I only found out after I went into hospital that it was not only some of the contractors that were getting sick but also Alcoa workers and people living near the plant. Whilst we worked there we were never told anything."

WSWS asked Grant about the union's response to his illness.

"First of all there was no response. Then one of the southwest organisers came up to the hospital to see me. He brought me a union T-shirt and a hat. I didn't see him again. I didn't know what to do or where to go. I had no money coming in and no compensation. Alcoa had told ABB to pay me, but I never saw any of that. Obviously they did not want to take liability for me. They never contacted me when I was in hospital. The union also basically didn't want to know about me.

Grant said that after Christmas 1997, the company gave the workers figures on the emissions at the plant, and the acceptable level of each individual chemical.

"They said the emissions were negligible. We asked what was the impact of the combination of all chemicals on the site. They couldn't answer. They never subjected any of the contract workers to health tests. Apparently now if you work on the liquor burning building you need to wear a suit, gloves and breathing apparatus. This only began after I went down sick."

Grant attacked ABB, Alcoa, Worksafe, the Health Department and the union for doing nothing.

The WSWS also spoke to Bill Van Der Pal, an elected workers safety representative at the site who has worked at Alcoa since 1994. He is currently on workers compensation after multiple chemical sensitivity.

"I was basically unaffected by health problems until the liquor burner started three years ago. I then began to be affected by the emissions at the refinery. It was not only me but numerous workers who started getting sick. Only after the workforce threatened to close down the plant did Alcoa spend \$5 million to deal with the emissions from the liquor burner. They installed a catalytic thermal oxidizer (CTO)."

Van Der Pal said that while the incidence of illnesses had fallen, numbers of workers, and local residents were still getting sick. He said he thought this could be due to the high level of emissions.

We asked him whether the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) had ever tested or monitored the emissions from Alcoa.

"To the best of my knowledge the DEP has never monitored the emissions from Alcoa. As with a lot of government departments they do none of their own monitoring, but rely on self-regulation.

"Many people thought that complaining about the health problems to Alcoa would see them dealt with by the relevant government departments. But that was never the case. Sadly none of the authorities will take any action unless these issues are raised in the mass media. This is not a satisfactory state of affairs in regards to the safety and health of the community."

Van Der Pal went on to explain that many workers and residents were concerned about the long term health impact of exposure to the emissions, and fearful of cancers and other serious illnesses developing.

A local resident, who also suffers from multiple chemical sensitivity, told us that asthma was on the increase in the area,

particularly among school children. She said doctors in the area were reluctant to comment or take a stand on the health problems because, in one way or another, they were connected with, or provided services to, Alcoa.

Recently a parliamentary standing committee of the West Australian Legislative Council concluded an investigation into the Wagerup plant. It was conducted, not to determine the source of the problem, but whether government departments had dealt adequately with public health concerns.

The committee's report, entitled "Administration of Environmental Complaints relating to Public Health" describes a process of buck passing by the relevant government departments to avoid any responsibility.

The Health Department of Western Australia told the committee that matters involving air pollution were the responsibility of the Department of Environmental Protection and that the health of the workers at the refinery was the responsibility of the Department of Minerals and Energy.

The Department of Minerals and Energy declared that it had been aware of the workers' concerns since May 1997. It had not set up any independent studies on the content of the emissions, but relied on Alcoa undertaking their own studies. Not surprisingly, these had revealed no major health problems.

The Department of Environmental Protection responded with the comment: "As the key issue is one of health, the Health Department will have primary carriage of the issue."

The committee's report concluded: "These responses displayed a reliance on Alcoa to monitor any possible health impact from its refinery's emissions, as is usual practice."

What emerges from the committee's investigation is that the DEP and the DME are agencies that carry out no independent monitoring. They simply issue licenses to pollute, and, together with the Health Department, work to protect the interests of business. Licenses are negotiated with management, not on the basis of health and environmental concerns, but on what the corporations can afford in terms of their bottom line.

To attract business investment, state and regional governments now require only the most minimal environmental regulations. The frightening scenario facing workers at Alcoa Wagerup, as well as residents in the area, is that the company intends to increase the quantity of alumina it produces by 50 per cent over the next 5 years.



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