

Australian steel company leaves deadly toxic legacy

Janine Harrison
15 November 1999

In September Australia's major steel-maker BHP closed down its plant in Newcastle, leaving a deadly toxic legacy that will continue to endanger residents and wildlife in the area long after the company has gone.

After 84 years of steel production the ground at the plant is heavily contaminated with toxic by-products, including cancer-causing hydrocarbons from the coke ovens, cyanide from the blast furnace refactories, and chlorides and hydroxides used in the "pickling" of steel. In addition, the company has devised a scheme to avoid responsibility for rehabilitation of the land.

As part of its "exit strategy" BHP management promised to promote a number of industrial projects on the vacated site, including an industrial park and a multi-purpose shipping terminal. It claimed that these projects would generate thousands of jobs and offset the 2,500 lost with the closure.

The exercise helped to placate working people in the area angered by the destruction of jobs. It also enabled BHP to have the site zoned for industrial use, sparing the company hundreds of millions of dollars in clean-up costs that would be required if the site were reclaimed for public or recreational use.

Instead of a thorough rehabilitation program, the company can now merely "cap and contain" the site by pouring a thick layer of concrete over the contaminated ground. This method, which has been fully approved by the EPA, will not prevent pollutants from seeping into the groundwater and contaminating surrounding areas.

Not only will future generations be left with a clean-up bill if the site is eventually used for other purposes, but promised jobs are unlikely to materialise. So far there has been little interest in the industrial park. P&O Ports, the main party in the terminal scheme, withdrew its support in August.

Evidence has also emerged that BHP has no intention of paying for the rehabilitation of land on nearby Kooragang Island, which it has used as a waste dump since the early 1960s. Pat Flowers, secretary of the Mayfield Residents Group and a member of the committee investigating pollution in the area, said that the Kooragang site had not been listed for rehabilitation. A BHP spokesman confirmed this by saying the company considered the site safe.

Massive amounts of waste have been dumped at Kooragang Island, creating a toxic time bomb. In 1986, when the steel mill was producing 1.9 million tonnes of steel annually, it is estimated that the company was dumping up to 250,000 tonnes of slag, 6,000 tonnes of liquid slurry containing lead and zinc soluble, 2,000 tonnes of zinc-contaminated BOS flue dust and 1,000 tonnes of "mixed materials" monthly at Kooragang. Asbestos insulation in plastic bags and lead-contaminated dust in steel drums have also been buried there.

The situation has been further exacerbated by the so-called "illegal" dumping of acid-containing materials such as pickling liquors, and lead and zinc wastes. A report by a BHP engineer in 1986 acknowledged that these and other contaminants on the site could leak into the Hunter River or the newly-created Kooragang wetlands park to the north.

Since then the Environmental Protection Authority has admitted that there is contamination of groundwater in the area, but it then attempted to play down the significance of this finding by stating that it is "nothing untoward or out of the ordinary for a steelworks site."

Despite opposition from local residents BHP took no action to prevent illegal dumping on Kooragang Island, and it was only in the early 1990s, after years of protests, that gates were finally erected at the site.

Two weeks prior to the shutdown BHP revealed that it would be pumping 144,000 litres of "treated sewerage," once used in the mill's cooling systems, directly into the Hunter River.

While other companies in the area connected to the main Hunter Water sewerage system years earlier, BHP's system remained a "secondary type" that had not been updated since the early 1970s. The company knew for two years that this method would become inoperable once the plant ceased production but management made no attempt to find an alternative method for waste disposal.

The executive director of the fishing industry body Oceanwatch said that the proposed direct discharge of treated sewerage could lead to a "nutrient overload and heavy metal contamination" of the river.

The Hunter River is already heavily polluted with BHP wastes, with testing showing that the presence of elements such as polyaromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), phosphorous, mercury, copper, zinc and manganese exceeds Australian government guidelines. However, BHP spokesman Greg Cameron referred to the polluted state of the waterway as a "storm in a teacup."

He claimed that the final dumping into the river was actually "good news" for the city as it marked the end of a 25-year period during which the company had been indirectly dumping large amounts of sewerage into the river on a daily basis.

Dismissing concerns about the toxic heritage that the company had bequeathed the region, Cameron told the local media that the most important thing was that "almost all of the land, air and water pollution associated with BHP would be ending with the plant's closure."

However, many of the health problems caused by BHP pollution may not become apparent for years. While the plant was in operation it released a combination of toxins, particularly dioxins and benzene, which have been linked with leukemia and other serious illnesses. These emissions have affected the health of workers, not only in the plant itself, but also in the surrounding suburbs.

Figures released by the Socialist Equality Party initiated Workers Inquiry in 1998 revealed that people living within 20 kilometres of the Newcastle steelworks were eight times more likely to contract leukemia, and four times more likely to contract other types of cancer,

than those living further away. This data had existed for at least two decades but had been ignored by successive State governments and their health officials, thus enabling BHP to continue releasing pollutants well in excess of World Health Organisation Standards. Newcastle residents will suffer the consequences of BHP's negligence for a long time to come.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact