Alcoa Australia admits cancer dangers

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Alcoa Australia publicly notified 3,000 former and present permanent workers in December that research results from Canada indicated that aluminium smelter workers face an increased risk of lung or bladder cancer if they had high exposure to coal tar pitch during their working lives. Alcoa has smelters at Point Henry, Geelong and Portland, both in Victoria, where coal tar pitch is combined with petroleum coke and baked at high temperatures to make anodes and cathodes used in smelting aluminium.

Eighteen permanent workers were not contacted, nor were those who worked for contractors. Trade unions estimate there could be 2,000 contractors potentially affected. The letter to employees admitted that the danger particularly applied to workers in anode forming, anode baking, anode rodding, potlining, pot starting and maintenance activities in the Electrode area. Besides breathing in the pitch, workers could have absorbed it through the skin or ingested it through the mouth as a result of eating or smoking.

The letter did not explain why the company had waited five years before informing workers of the results of the 1995 study of Alcan employees at the Arvida smelter in Quebec. It said Alcoa worldwide had voluntarily reduced its workplace exposure limits to "one quarter of those currently required by the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission (Worksafe Australia)". The NOHSC limit is 0.2 milligrams of coal tar pitch per cubic metre of air, and Alcoa has adopted a standard of 0.05 milligrams. The Australian Workers Union (AWU) wants the level reduced to 0.01 milligrams, as there are no totally safe levels for carcinogenic fumes.

The letter claimed that Alcoa's two smelters have lower exposure levels than the Canadian plant, which uses Soderberg technology. Yet no mention was made of the fact that before 1990, Alcoa used a much more dangerous form of coal tar pitch than the paste form now used. Modern pre-bake plants emit less than 0.01 kilograms of emissions per tonne of aluminium. Alcoa introduced this method because it produced a higher output of aluminium, not because it was safer.

Without admitting any liability, the Alcoa letter advised workers who had been exposed for more than a year to seek medical tests for bladder cancer. It acknowledged that no early detection test for lung cancer exists. Further, it claimed that for the past 20 years Point Henry workers had been made well aware of the risks of coal tar pitch "and have managed and handled the material accordingly with respiratory protection, use of protective clothing and barrier creams to minimise skin contact, and routine laundering of clothes."

One former Alcoa worker Bill Aitken told the Melbourne *Age* that the mouth masks and protective cream were an inadequate defence against the clouds of coal tar dust. "The cream sweated off within minutes and you had a mask but the rest of your face and head caught the dust. You were breathing it, you were eating it." He described the filthy conditions: "You came out black as the ace of spades at night. When you went on holiday you'd still be staining your best shirt for weeks." Exposure to the pitch rendered the workers susceptible to sunburn.

Alcoa's letter also referred to studies from Monash University in Victoria and the University of Western Australia, claiming that preliminary results from these studies reveal cancer rates in Alcoa workers no worse than in the general population. In fact the smelter workers covered in the Monash study were only those working since 1983, the year Victoria began to record all cancer cases, yet the Point Henry smelter operated from 1963. AWU national health officer Yossi Berger said the danger period for coal tar pitch was between 1960 and 1990, when there was considerably reduced regulation of fumes.

Alcoa did not mention paying for the tests and treatments that workers have to undergo. The unions have entered into negotiations with the company, and to date it has agreed to pay for the first round of medical tests. That is, it will cover the gap between WorkCover (workers' compensation) payments and the cost of tests. The unions are asking for payment for medical tests and treatment for all Alcoa staff and contractors.

Alcoa sent the workers a fact sheet to give to their private physicians. This sheet also claimed that for the past 20 years employees had been made well aware of the risks, and had lower levels of exposure than the Canadian workers. It

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stated: "For example, if your patient worked in direct contact with coal tar pitch for 10 years, and the rest of the time worked in less exposed jobs, the risk may be as low as a quarter of the maximum risk."

This is playing down the potential dangers as much as possible. Such calculations of risk are based on average figures, and omit the dangers of transient bursts, giving intermittent higher exposures.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) organiser for Geelong, Chris Spindler, said the company is keeping its records on workers who have contracted cancer, as well as internal health checks, confidential. Furthermore, it has rejected union demands that it place advertisements in national daily newspapers to alert former contractors.

But the union's criticisms come after the fact. It is striking that it was the company that made public the results of the five-year-old Canadian research, not the union, which has carried out no major campaign over the health dangers confronting aluminium workers.

After a brief flurry, media coverage of the issue has ceased. Likewise, politicians have attempted to present Alcoa in a good light. In a revealing comment in state parliament, Ian Tresize, the Labor member for Geelong, congratulated Alcoa for being the first employer to warn employees and for ensuring that workers wear protective safety masks. Tresize requested that the minister responsible for workers compensation refer the matter to the NOHSC.

Equally respectful to Alcoa, Local Government and WorkCover Minister, Bob Cameron, replied that his office had drafted a letter to the NOHSC asking for a national response. He stated that with four smelters located outside Victoria, a national register must be established. He said he had ordered the Victorian WorkCover Authority to enter into discussions with Alcoa to see how it may assist the NOHSC with any necessary work.

Alcoa's relationship with both Labor and Liberal state governments has been extremely cordial since it invested in Victoria. In 1984 the Cain Labor government struck an electricity supply deal with the company that cost taxpayers $1.2 billion in subsidies pegged to the world price of aluminium.

Today the company is not concerned by parliamentary scrutiny. Chairman of the Aluminium Company of America (Alcoa) Paul H. O'Neill stated in a recent interview with the magazine *Aluminium Today*: "I don't see environmental issues as a negative for aluminium or Alcoa, they are our friend. As long as legislatures and governing bodies don't do stupid things, we'll be fine."

Paul Johnson, a Point Henry worker, told the *WSWS*: "I have worked at Alcoa for 14 years, and during my apprenticeship we worked in every area of the plant, so I've worked with coal tar pitch, but only for a short period. Without a doubt the exposure was there earlier. I work on permanent afternoon shift with one other bloke. Thirty-five years ago he started as a production workerâ€”he's since become a tradesman. When he started, they shovelled up the pitch by hand with shovels, and the air was black with it. The workers didn't wear any protection most of the time.

"Alcoa has provided fairly good respiratory protection for about the last six years, but before [that] there were just masks. Now there is positive air displacementâ€”the worker wears a helmet and it blows fresh air from a filter pack on his back or on his belt, and there is a battery pack. But workers don't always wear them, because they slow you down, and when there is a push for more production, it is easier not to wear them.

"Alcoa has admitted the risks about cancer, but is trying to contain the panic. A few people I know have wondered why Alcoa came out publicly. I think the reason is that from the company perspective it is the best way to proceed. It makes it look like they're proactive; it looks like they're an upstanding corporate citizen. The public will think Alcoa is a good company. From the company point of view, Alcoa knows this is going to come out eventuallyâ€”it's inevitable, so better that they say it first. They've taken a profit estimation that it will cost them less in the long run.

"One thing about Alcoa at Point Henry in the last 14 years is that they have played it very hard about their public image. That is all it isâ€”image. They go and plant some trees outside, while meanwhile they rip out all the bush in Western Australia and leave behind devastation.

"As for contract workers, Alcoa hasn't notified contract workers at all. The company only has records since 1983. The real test of the unions will be when this gets further down the road, when it becomes clear how many workers have cancer. What will be the unions' position then? Alcoa has made excellent profits all this time. Are the unions going to challenge the company's profits? When will we get down to the truth?"

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