

Continuing government cover-up of asbestos health disaster in Australia

Margaret Rees
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Despite decades of inaction and coverup by successive governments, the ravages caused by asbestos to the health of an Australian regional community are beginning to come to light. A recent documentary, screened on ABC television's *Four Corners*, reviewed the experiences of residents in the Latrobe Valley—the site of several power stations, 160 kilometres from the Victorian state capital, Melbourne—and their struggle to have their voices heard.

Asbestos can cause three separate diseases—asbestosis, or thickening of the lungs, where the victim loses the capacity to breathe at all; cancer of the outer lining of the lung or mesothelioma, for which there is no known cure; and lung carcinoma, or cancer deep inside the lung.

From 1924, when the first State Electricity Commission (SEC) power station opened, thousands of tonnes of asbestos were used for insulation. No protection was afforded the workers until the late 1970s. Even during the last few years, the close-knit community has been subjected to clouds of dust as old power stations have been dismantled.

The SEC was warned of the health dangers emanating from the Yallourn Power Station in 1944, when Dr Douglas Shiels from the Victorian Health Department recommended medical examinations of workers exposed to asbestos for long periods. The SEC refused, stating “a medical examination is a matter for the employees themselves.” In 1945, regulation levels for asbestos were set by law, but never enforced.

Because of the practices carried out in the power stations, every worker faced the risk of contamination. In 1956, the Victorian government declared spraying asbestos or lagging (wrapping a wet asbestos mixture around pipes for insulation) to be dangerous. But workers were still required to open bags of loose asbestos and tip the dry fibre into 44-gallon drums for mixing with clay and water.

As the mixture was applied to pipes, pieces would dry and fall to the floor. Some of them would be cleared away by the ladders and their assistants, and compressed air hoses would blow the residue from the floor. A cloud of asbestos fibre would continuously envelop the power station. Workers would be covered in it, as well as carrying the dust home on the soles of their shoes. Their wives would wash their overalls and become contaminated, while their children played in asbestos

dumps around the area, gaily throwing the fibre at one another.

In 1971 one of the SEC's managers returned from Britain with documents proving the link between asbestos and mesothelioma, established in the British *Journal of Industrial Medicine* more than a decade earlier, in 1960. It took nearly three years before the SEC held a meeting with union members and unveiled an internal code of practice on the safe handling of asbestos. It was not until 1979 that a joint working party on asbestos was set up between the unions and the SEC.

The worst industrial disaster in the country

As workers became aware of their asbestos-related diseases, increasing numbers began to pursue compensation under the Workers Compensation Act or under common law. Latrobe Valley compensation lawyer Steve Plunkett, who has acted for hundreds of these clients, most of them now dead, stated recently: “Without doubt this is the worst industrial disaster that has ever befallen this country.”

A 1995 book entitled *Asbestos Time-Bomb*, by George Wragg, a former shop-steward in the power industry, detailed how SEC workers were exposed to the deadly asbestos dust.

Wragg and others had pursued the question during the 1960s, but with little success, until the asbestos joint taskforce was set up. In its first year alone, 1,700 tonnes of asbestos were stripped out of power stations.

“Power stations were virtual mountains of asbestos,” Wragg wrote. “Virtually every employee who worked in the industry, whether in power stations, depots, or other sections, was subject to levels of fibre inhalations of undoubtedly lethal proportions. And as a long period of time—up to 40 years—can elapse before an exposed person will display an illness, there is a great opportunity to hide the matter completely.”

He calculated that by combining the number of SEC employees and contractors since 1924, as well as their wives and families and the many visitors to the power stations, the total number exposed to high levels of the deadly fibre was close to one and a half million.

In the 1970s the scandal of asbestos contamination in Wittenoom in Western Australia exploded. The SEC decided to close down the Latrobe Valley town of Yallourn and bulldoze it, supposedly to mine the coal underneath. Wragg claimed that the coal was worthless. He maintained the real reason for the

SEC's closure of the town was to disperse the residents before their lung cancer, mesothelioma and asbestosis developed and thereby prevent confirmation of the existence of a cluster.

Soon after the publication of Wragg's book, Morwell MP Keith Hamilton declared in parliament that 40,000 SEC workers in the Latrobe Valley were estimated to be suffering asbestos-related diseases.

The privatisation of the SEC

The Latrobe Valley is a tightly knit working class area that has been subjected to two decades of unrelenting government attacks. The workforce in the power industry was slashed from its 1982 peak of 23,000 to less than 5,000 by 1996. From 1992-96 more than 80 percent of the workers in the Latrobe Valley left the power industry. The power unions agreed to the job shedding, and brokered departure packages with successive state governments. Unemployment today in Moe is 20 percent, the highest rate in Victoria and overall unemployment for the Latrobe Valley is 15.6 percent.

At the same time, the area's social infrastructure has been gutted. Two public hospitals were amalgamated in 1991 and the combined hospital was then privatised in 1997.

The privatisation of the SEC and the sale of its various arms netted the state Liberal government at least \$13.5 billion. In June 1996 the government set up the Victorian Managed Insurance Authority (VMIA) to manage government insurance risk on a competitive basis, with the full support of the Labor opposition. Opposition treasurer Steve Bracks endorsed the measure warmly, saying it would "ensure that Victoria has the internationally competitive arrangements necessary for managing insurance risk."

No private company would have purchased the power stations if the package had included residual liability for asbestos compensation. In July 1998 the VMIA took on the responsibility from the SEC for residual quantifiable claims (mainly asbestos related.)

While figures do not exclusively comprise former SEC asbestos liabilities, the claims being settled by the VMIA are growing substantially. In 1997, \$83 million worth of claims were settled; in 1998 the figure was \$96 million. In 1999, the year the Bracks Labor government was elected, it jumped to \$229 million and in 2000 it reached \$300 million.

George Wragg died a year ago. In the last year of his life he drafted a new book, *Legacy of Evil*, describing the demolition by explosives of three heavily contaminated power stations in the 1990s. Continual cost-cutting meant that residential areas of Yallourn North, Morwell, Newborough and Moe were enveloped in clouds of dust, subjecting residents to the further possibility of contamination.

Government refuses mass screening

Despite the fact, long known, that Latrobe Valley power industry workers die 15 years younger than the national average, successive state governments have failed to conduct any epidemiological research.

The more the extent of the disaster emerges, the more the state government works to cover it up. The Labor government has refused to concede any overarching legal acceptance of exposure on behalf of the SEC. Interviewed on the *Four Corners* program, Attorney-General Rob Hulls refused to answer any questions on the subject, claiming he had never heard of the concept.

The reason is that acknowledgement of a cluster would allow victims to bring a class action to court, rather than being forced to fight separate cases for compensation. This would take the amount of compensation they could win into an entirely different realm. Class actions by former miners in Britain over white finger vibration and other industrial diseases, for example, have resulted in settlements in the billions of pounds. This is what the Labor government is desperately trying to avoid.

Last year, Labor health minister John Thwaites refused to fund a mass screening of former SEC employees for lung cancer, at a cost of between \$500,000 to \$1 million. Consequently, the diseases caused by asbestos will not be detected in present and future victims in time to save their lives.

Cheryl Wragg, daughter of George Wragg and a member of the Gippsland Asbestos Related Disease Support Network (GARDS), formed by Latrobe Valley residents, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "The problem of a mass diagnosis for the government is that there are still people dying who have not put in a claim. A comprehensive screening program would lead to a rise in the number of compensation claims. The government just doesn't want to face up to its responsibilities.

"They are the perpetrators, they also have the responsibility for fixing up the problem. Basically you have a situation, where if a worker now has mesothelioma, he gets the diagnosis and is sent home to die. The only support whatsoever is provided by GARDS."



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