

Cancer danger at Australian mail centre

Postal workers demand inquiry and relocation

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Workers at the Capalaba postal Delivery and Business Centre in Brisbane voted overwhelmingly on May 3 to demand a detailed inquiry into the serious health problems that have developed at their mail centre. They also called for their relocation, contradicting Australia Post management's public statement that staff had been comforted by its claims, based on flimsy preliminary reports, that the building is safe.

A high percentage of the full-time workers at the centre have developed cancer and other potentially fatal diseases over the past decade. The epidemic did not come to light until April 18, when three of the victims, Angie Adams, David Kemp and Elizabeth Humbles, decided to speak out against Australia Post's decision to keep the office open.

Adams first wrote to Australia Post, a federal government-owned corporation, in February after discovering that at least 20 of her former workmates had serious illnesses. But for two months management tried to cover up the situation.

Speaking to the local press last month, the three workers voiced their concerns about Australia Post's refusal to shut the office for safety reasons. "We're dying and we want something done. What price is a life? Get those people out of that building!" said Adams, who suffers from systemic lupus erythematosus—a rare and incurable chronic inflammatory disease.

"I would have thought they would have closed it straight away," said Kemp, a former night sorter who suffers from the disorder amyloidosis, which affects the liver, kidney and spleen. Humbles, who has Graves' disease and auto-immune hepatitis, said she did not want anyone else to go through what she had.

The mail centre in Capalaba, an outer Brisbane bayside suburb, stands next to an Energex electricity sub-station. Over the past 10 years, out of 53 full-time staff, 25 have

developed cancer, at least four have died and others have serious illnesses. Counting part-time workers, 25 percent of the workforce have developed illnesses since 1998.

After carrying out her own inquiries, Adams found that four staff members had died, another five had contracted leukaemia-related diseases, five had cancer, and another six had non-curable auto-immune-related diseases. When she wrote to Australia Post in February raising her concerns, however, the management and Energex merely carried out some limited tests on the electromagnetic field levels around the post office and the electricity sub-station.

Nothing further was done until the workers went to the local newspaper. The state Labor government's Health Minister Wendy Edmond then announced that her department—Queensland Health—would examine the sick leave records of former Capalaba post office employees and conduct other tests.

Just a week later, on April 25, before the results of the further tests were known, Queensland Health and Australia Post rushed into a joint press conference to claim that post office workers had no reason to be concerned.

Queensland Health chief officer Brian Campbell and Australia Post medical adviser Ed Castrisos revealed that 30 out of 100 workers, past and present, had contracted cancer and auto-immune diseases. Nevertheless, they claimed that these results were most likely "a coincidence".

Campbell referred to statistics showing that 45 out of 1,000 Australians would contract cancer over a 10-year period. "So seven or eight cases of cancer in 100 people over 10 years is not surprising," he said. "We all do develop illnesses at times—it's extremely unlikely anything will turn up as a common factor".

Castrisos declared: “Today's findings are a great comfort to our staff and their families who have been distressed by recent reports. The Queensland Health report is consistent with all of our advice to date that there is no immediate health risk to staff at the Capalaba Delivery and Business Centre.”

These claims have no foundation. In the first place, even the understated figures provided by Campbell and Castrisos—seven or eight cases of cancer out of 100—are equivalent to 70 or 80 cancers out of 1,000 which is significantly higher than the Australian average. Moreover, the sick leave records are unlikely to provide a full picture, particularly for those workers who became ill after retiring. According to the three staff, the number of full-timers who contracted cancer over 10 years was 25 out of 53—equivalent to 471 out of 1,000. Australia Post and Queensland Health did not bother to speak to a single worker before examining their records and then using them to claim there was no reason for concern.

Furthermore, on April 25, no tests had been completed on the soil, air and water inside the post office building. On May 2, Australia Post spokeswoman Janelle Mangan claimed that initial results from such tests, run by hired consultants and checked by the state government's Environment Protection Agency (EPA), showed no contamination. She released no details, however.

Mangan said bacterial and radiation tests were unfinished and no results had come through from a “double-check study” conducted by the federal government's CSIRO scientific research agency. Nonetheless, she declared that the results so far gave “no scientific basis” to link the illnesses to the cancer deaths.

The mail centre site was previously listed on the EPA's environmental management register. The land was once used for a petrol station. A saw mill also operated on the site, producing road pegs, guide posts and power poles that would have been treated with arsenic, a chemical now known to be carcinogenic.

A resident who grew up in the area in the 1950s has told the local press that he remembers a vacant lot abutting the post office site being used by the Southern Electricity Authority of Queensland as a dumping ground for old electrical transformers, which used to leak some type of liquid.

The Communications, Plumbing and Electrical Union has accused Australia Post management of intimidating workers at the post office. On April 18, the day-shift workers initially voted to keep working in the building. According to union organiser Cameron Thiele, senior

managers, accompanied by Ed Castrisos, held a meeting with the staff before the vote, making workers concerned about losing their jobs.

Tests carried out by the union have revealed radiation “hot spots”. Don Maisch, a Hobart-based consultant on electromagnetic exposure who analysed the results, said the building readings were generally low, but there were areas of concern in the staff lunchroom and at the front counter. “At this point, you can't say that it is an electromagnetic field problem. The best I can say for now is we have looked at the electromagnetic field angle and there are a few areas of concern there,” he said.

The response of the federal and state authorities to the Capalaba cancer outbreak—sitting on workers' evidence for weeks and then rushing to dismiss any cause for concern—is similar to the official reaction to the Wollongong cancer and leukaemia crisis four years ago. At least 15 young people living or working in the suburbs immediately to the south of BHP's Port Kembla steelworks and the nearby copper smelter contracted leukaemia between 1989 and 1997—a rate some 14 times the state average.

When 20-year-old Melissa Cristiano, who later died of leukaemia, first tried to alert public health officials to the emerging death toll among her friends, the authorities turned a deaf ear. Months later, when she took her concerns to the local media, the NSW state Labor government sought to head off the public outcry by announcing an Illawarra Public Health Unit inquiry, which concluded that no explanation could be given for the pattern of deaths.

In order to expose the government's whitewash and give workers and residents a means of discovering the truth, the Socialist Equality Party organised an independent workers' inquiry, which found clear evidence of a link between the very high leukaemia and cancer rates and the distance that sufferers lived from the industrial complex.



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