

Australian Alcoa workers strike over toxic emissions

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Some 300 subcontractors at Alcoa's Kwinana alumina refinery near Perth in Western Australia went on strike late last month over the company's cancer-causing emissions. Alcoa workers have been in dispute with the giant multinational since 1996 because more than 200 workers have suffered health problems, including nine cases of serious illness. The strikers have returned to work while Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) officials hold talks with management.

Workers and local residents have long complained that the refinery's liquor burning unit (LBU) is responsible for a cocktail of toxic chemicals that is causing sicknesses such as multiple chemical sensitivity and Good Pastures Disease. Similar problems have occurred at Alcoa's refinery at Wagerup, in the state's southwest, which also has an LBU.

After 12 workers became sick earlier this year, Alcoa agreed to set up a joint committee with the AMWU to work on ways of overcoming the health problems, yet there has been no evidence of improvement. There was also a stop work meeting at the Kwinana refinery earlier this year, but nothing has been resolved. Alcoa has admitted the presence of a range of dangerous chemicals but denied that they are at dangerous levels.

The strike erupted after the discovery of documents proving that Alcoa has known since at least 1990 about the likelihood of illnesses. Bill Van der Pal, an AMWU health and safety representative, gave a parliamentary committee a memo written in July 1990 by Alcoa research scientists. They stated: "We should do some homework on how we communicate this information since many of these compounds are known carcinogenics, some of them potent carcinogenics."

Another document showed details of a proposed

Alcoa presentation to Kwinana refinery workers informing them that its liquor burners produce chemicals such as alkaline dust, caustic mist and benzene, a known leukaemia-causing agent. The presentation was never made.

Most revealing of all was a report written for the company in 1997 by Brian Galton-Fenzi, then an occupational health consultant. "Any unusual diseases (lymphomas, cancers) and possibly the more common ones (asthma, bronchitis) may have to be defended in court, again likely to be costly in time, resources and public relations," he wrote. "Cancer is a major concern to all communities. This is best managed by legitimising the dread."

Galton-Fenzi suggested means of overcoming community panic over the emissions. Other documents attached to his report detailed short-term and long-term health hazards associated with liquor-burning emissions, including leukaemia.

Galton-Fenzi is now the chief occupational physician at the Department of Minerals and Petroleum, one of the state government agencies that is meant to regulate health and safety in the minerals industry. In an attempt at damage control, the state Labor government's Development Minister Clive Brown has instructed Galton-Fenzi not to deal with Alcoa because of a "possible conflict of interest".

Workers and residents have accused Alcoa of hiding this vital information on the health impact of its emissions. This month their concerns were confirmed by the release of a state government report, prepared by a panel of medical experts, which found that emissions from the Wagerup refinery had damaged the health of workers and nearby residents.

The group, chaired by University of Western Australia (UWA) Professor of Public Health D'Arcy

Holman, studied about 30 affected people. Health Department official Michael Jackson said the experts found a “link between exposure to emissions and the health concerns they see in these people” who “needed appropriate clinical management”.

Scientists from the UWA, Murdoch University, the Department of Environmental Protection and other groups have been monitoring plumes of smoke 30 to 100 metres wide from the Wagerup facility. Scientists said the emissions contained an array of chemicals and the plume sprayed like a garden hose out of control, causing a range of illnesses among local residents.

The plumes of smoke settle and stay on the ground from half an hour to 24 hours, depending on the weather conditions. According to Barry Carbon, an Alcoa consultant and former Environmental Protection Agency chief: “You could walk into and out of it.”

In the face of this damning evidence, state Environment Minister Judy Edwards said she had instructed her department not to allow an increase in emissions at Wagerup. Yet, the government and its agencies, including the Department of Environmental Protection and the Environmental Protection Agency, have already granted Alcoa a licence to boost production levels.

Alcoa’s Wagerup refinery is subject to a licence issued under the Environmental Protection Act for up to 2.2 million tonnes per annum (mtpa) of alumina, but its latest production licence permits it to increase production to 2.35 mtpa with no new environmental restrictions. In fact, the new licence merely rubberstamps the fact that Alcoa has been producing at that level since October 2000.

Alcoa won the approval despite six appeals lodged by individuals, doctors and the Wagerup Community Health Awareness Group. Their objections included lack of community consultation, the health effects of increased production, and the need for limits on emissions, noise and odour.

Some doctors have sharply criticised the decision, pointing out that all the emission readings relied upon by the government were taken by Alcoa or someone working on its behalf. Even if the individual readings were accurate, they did not reveal the cumulative effects of the emissions on health.

Anxious to secure greater international investment, the previous Liberal Party state government of Richard

Court approved a \$1 billion expansion of the Wagerup refinery in 1995, allowing it to increase output by a further 40 percent from 2.35 to 3.3 mtpa. The company has yet to carry out the expansion because of low aluminum prices.

Together with successive state governments, the union leaders have permitted Alcoa to continue pumping out its toxins. Workers and residents have raised the dangers since 1996 but the AMWU has confined industrial action to isolated stoppages at Wagerup and Kwinana. Union officials have been co-opted onto joint committees with management.

The latest strike was called off even though Alcoa refused to pay workers who fall ill. Alcoa merely agreed to send letters to employees saying that they “may or may not” have been exposed to dangerous levels of emissions and to organise medical checkups. Yet another committee will be formed to discuss issues such as workers’ health.



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