

New Zealand sawmill workers' health problems caused by chemical poisoning

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A survey released last month of 60 former New Zealand sawmill workers and families of deceased workers found many suffering a wide range of illnesses, including cancer. The report blames chemicals commonly used at sawmills until the late 1980s for the chronic illnesses.

Sawmill Workers Against Poisons (SWAP) commissioned the study, which was carried out with the support of the Environment Ministry and Bay of Plenty region health authorities. The sawmill workers established SWAP in 1996, after years of frustration and lack of action by authorities over their accumulating health problems.

Most had worked at the Carter Holt-owned Whakatane Sawmill, which shut down in 1988, forcing many into long-term unemployment. Although SWAP members had all previously been involved in the Wood Industries Union, the unions used the fact that the men were no longer dues-paying members to wash their hands of the case.

SWAP initially took its case to the Vietnam Veterans Association, and discovered a "plethora" of international research linking chemicals prevalent in the wood industry to chronic long-term health problems. Because most of the workers were Maori, SWAP then obtained the support of the NZ Maori Council to sponsor the research.

The report, compiled by social science researcher Gwenda Monteith Paul, found that a large number of the former workers had symptoms associated with exposure to the organic chemical Pentachlorophenol (PCP). The symptoms included high blood pressure, depression, dermatitis, mood swings, blood disorders and cancer. Twenty-eight families of mill workers who had died were interviewed and it was found that the major cause of death was cancer, followed by strokes and heart disease—13 of the men had cancer at the time of death. The average age of the 28 deceased workers was 61 years.

Wives of workers surveyed had similar patterns of illnesses and symptoms, although not as severe as the men. Thirty-eight per cent of the women had experienced a miscarriage, well above the national average of 15 to 20 per cent. The report suggests that the wives may have been

exposed to PCP through the common practice of hand and wringer-washing of husbands' work clothes, which were saturated on a daily basis with PCP and other chemicals. Workers' households also often used treated timber in their open fireplaces before closed fireplaces were installed in the early 1980s.

Forty-seven families reported respiratory problems among children and grandchildren, while 35 families reported eczema, dermatitis and other skin problems. Hearing, sight, birth defects and learning difficulties were also prevalent. The report cites a 1996 Canadian study of 20,000 offspring of sawmill workers, which discovered increased risks of congenital abnormalities of the eyes and genital organs, as well as higher incidence of spina bifida. The Canadian study concluded that its findings supported an hypothesis of inter-generational "male-mediated developmental toxicity".

PCP was widely used in the timber industry for years as a cheap treatment for sapstain, a fungal infection commonly found in softwoods such as pine. It is an organic chemical produced by reacting chlorine gas with phenol. The process creates a number of toxic impurities such as tetrachlorophenol, hexachlorobenzene and several types of dioxins and dibenzofurans. The main route of absorption is through the skin. Some of the more chronic health effects, including cancer and diabetes, do not appear until long after exposure. The sawmill workers were constantly exposed to PCP as they mixed chemicals and handled wet, treated timber.

Concerns about PCP use surfaced in the New Zealand wood industry in the mid-1980s. This led to sawmill owners carrying out urine tests on workers. However, common practice was to move affected workers to temporary duties in less exposed areas for a few weeks if the tests showed a level of PCP contamination considered too high. Little information was given to the men regarding the results of the tests, nor was there ever any direction given to up-grade protective measures. The men who worked with the chemicals had little or no idea of what the testing was about.

The provision and management of protective clothing was

completely inadequate throughout the industry. Not one participant reported that they were told how to use the clothing provided or the purpose or importance of using any of it. Men who were allocated glasses or masks to do certain jobs found that they either did not fit properly or misted up. None of the men reported ever being told that protective clothing and gear was to guard against chemical exposure. The report observes: “Without proper information and instruction it probably increased the amount of exposure as men continued to wear chemical soaked clothes and gloves”.

In 1987 Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) circulated a paper warning about the toxicity of PCP. While it identified the main short-term effects of too much exposure, such as nausea, vomiting and headaches, and some of the longer-term dangers including liver and kidney problems, it specifically ruled out cancer. PCPs were banned for use in the timber industry in 1998-9. In 1990, primarily due to concerns about PCP in the environment, a national task force was established to investigate PCP and other chemicals. As a result, the NZ Pesticides Board stopped the use of PCP in agricultural sprays. It was not until 1996 that OSH finally produced a report into the timber industry, which unequivocally concluded that exposure to PCP in the workplace had caused serious short and long-term health effects.

Despite the mounting evidence, the Whakatane workers consistently failed to gain any recognition or compensation through the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC)—a “stumbling block”, according to the report, that remains to this day. A number of the men applied to ACC for work-related illness compensation. One applied twice on the basis of a medical report, which confirmed that his illness was caused by inhaling chemicals. All claims were rejected with the exception of one worker who receives minor travel costs to attend treatment sessions.

SWAP has obtained a medical opinion saying that ACC has defined the level of proof required for compensation so strictly that it is almost impossible to get the corporation to accept that workers’ continuing ill-health is related to chemical exposure. The time lapse between working with the chemicals and the appearance of cancers makes it scientifically impossible, at this point, for the workers to conclusively prove—according to ACC criteria—that such illnesses are directly related to exposure to PCPs.

With no ACC recognition, the former workers, many of whom are on social welfare benefits, find it very difficult to access the health care that they need, in particular specialist care. In the words of the report, appeals to doctors and health authorities have consistently met with “at best” little or no response, and at worst “ridicule”.

The report recommends that all ex-sawmill workers from

the Whakatane, Kawerau, Kinleith and Waipa sawmills and their families be given free health care, with specific attention given to dioxin testing. The group is lobbying for free health care for those with chemical-related illness, and before the recent election sent copies of the report to the Labour government.

SWAP spokesman Joe Harawira told the *World Socialist Web Site* that replies had been received from Prime Minister Helen Clark and Associate Maori Affairs Minister Tariana Turia. However, Ruth Dyson, the minister in charge of ACC, claimed that the report failed to conclusively prove a link between the prior contact with PCP and the workers’ health problems. Harawira said it was obvious from a television interview with Dyson that she “hadn’t even read the report”.

The workers were intending to boycott a meeting convened on August 9 by Bay of Plenty regional and local authorities in response to the report. The organisers were not prepared to have SWAP attend on an equal footing, wanting them rather to “just say the [Maori] prayers at the beginning of the meeting and again at the end”. Instead, SWAP convened a counter-meeting at a different venue.

Harawira also described how the unions had initially worked with SWAP to raise awareness of the health problems associated with PCPs. However, in 1996 during the course of the filming of a documentary by Ninox Films, “differences of opinion” arose with the unions, prompting them to pull out of the project. According to Harawira, the unions had their own agenda—closely aligned to protecting the interests of the company.

SWAP is currently campaigning with Greenpeace to have all remaining contaminated sites cleaned up, including 25 dumps in the Whakatane area. Greenpeace has criticised the government’s 2001 dioxin action plan because it concentrates on minor issues such as regulating dioxin in incinerators, backyard burning of rubbish, treated wood and copper wire recycling. The plan ignores the key requirements of the Stockholm Convention, an international treaty to which the Labour government is a signatory. The convention promotes the outlawing of dioxins in pollution-causing industries and calls for health and environmental damage caused by major contaminations to be addressed.



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