

WSWS interviews local residents

“Kwinana is the cancer capital of Western Australia”

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several residents in Western Australia who have been pressing for action to be taken over emissions from Alcoa’s plants at Kwinana and Wagerup.

Anna Breed, whose husband John was an Alcoa worker and died suddenly from sinus cancer, explained that he was constantly exposed to toxic waste and emissions in the course of his work. John Breed was just one of a number of workers on a list of those who worked in a group of buildings known as K58 at the Kwinana plant and either died or became sick.

He worked for Alcoa in Kwinana for 24 years from 1978. During that time he worked in a number of departments, including as a process operator in Department K58 from 1993 onwards. His wife Anna said that he had gone to a dentist in January 2002 about a lump on his gum, was diagnosed with sinus cancer and died on May 19.

She said doctors claimed it was the sort of cancer found in heavy smokers but John had been a non-smoker. She hit out at Alcoa’s claim that her husband’s illness was not caused by working at the plant. “When we went on holidays with John, his persistent cough would disappear. As soon as he was back at work the cough would start again.

“When John was working in K58 he would go down on a lift into the tanks to use dynamite to take off the waste from the side of the tanks. It was called ‘descaling’.” When involved in the operation he would get caustic waste all over him on “his goggles his uniform and his boots,” Anna Breed explained.

Like others at the plant he was affected by constant emissions. “Once emissions came over where he was working and he was immobilised for 20 minutes. This

is not an isolated incident. Other men have collapsed at the plant due to fumes.”

Calling for urgent measures to redress the situation at Alcoa, Anna said: “I’ve always said it has to be a combined effort. The medical establishment, government, unions, residents need to put pressure on Alcoa. The government authorities are so dismissive. So are some doctors.

“I think respiratory masks have to be improved; pollution must be controlled. They [Alcoa] spent \$8 million at the Wagerup plant redoing the tanks. Alcoa shut the liquor burner, because they knew it was dangerous. John worked 100 metres from it. It’s only when workers have threatened strike, or production levels are affected, that they shut down and work on parts of plant.

“The plant needs to be made safer. Don’t work in Department K58 for more than five years. Workers need to be consulted by the company.”

She said it was vital to contact people who worked at Alcoa previously to check on their health. “Two widows contacted me after I was interviewed by the newspaper. Both of their husbands had worked at Alcoa. One of them worked inside the tanks. One of them contracted cancer of the oesophagus.”

Speaking of the affects on the wider community, Anna pointed out: “I think this is the tip of the iceberg. Kwinana is the cancer capital of Western Australia. Workers were told working at Alcoa was as safe as a backyard BBQ. It’s demeaning to be told this. They [Alcoa] should care about the exposure to the combination of chemicals and the effects on the men who are there 36 hours a week, working in close range of these chemicals.

“This is a community problem. There is new housing going up around the plant.” She pointed out that a lot of the waste from Alcoa is dumped in the state’s goldfields areas. “The waste is just going somewhere else.

“Alcoa knows that the environmental issues are connected to the legal issues they face from workers who are sick or who have died. I think it’s all starting to unravel for Alcoa. People are starting to know about what is going on. I hope some good comes out of this terrible story.”

Explaining why she has spoken out, Anna said: “I never want other men to get sinus cancer. It’s really disturbing. I warn other workers, do not stay in the job too long. The money might be good but John sacrificed his life, providing for his family.”

Tony Hall from the Yarloop and Districts Concerned Residents Committee spoke to the WSWs about the recently released findings of the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) audit of emissions at the Wagerup plant and the company’s refusal to monitor volatile organic compounds in the air around the plant.

Yarloop is a town close to Alcoa’s Wagerup refinery and the residents’ committee has been engaged in a constant struggle for proper monitoring of emissions.

Hill pointed out that while the DEP conducted the audit, it was in fact based on data provided by the company. He said the Alcoa’s rejection of the group’s request for volatile organic compounds monitoring proved that such industries “shouldn’t be allowed to decide what the community needs to know about pollution. We need to know what is being emitted and its effect as a cocktail or combination of chemicals.

“Alcoa always said there were no compounds found that could be linked to health problems. The ambient monitoring did not use up-to-date equipment. We took samples ourselves and yet Alcoa deny the compounds detected have come from the refinery, suggesting other sources or contamination are the probable cause, so the results could not be used.”

“The expansion of the plant will cause greater impacts. Just the sheer size will have more impact, not just the liquor burner. There should be lower production levels until the problems are fixed. Instead Alcoa wants to double its output. We experience noise and odors and health problems on an almost daily

basis.”

“We wanted independent monitoring to make sure the equipment used was accurate, that the right chemicals were being looked at, to take into account the sheer number of chemicals in the air. We want to be able to identify the chemicals that are causing the serious health defects. We need monitoring inside and outside the plant. We need to question all reports that come out of Alcoa, as the independent audit identified 110 flaws in Alcoa’s monitoring.

“In the past, monitoring has been done while the liquor burner is not running. That is not accurate. They do not have proper meteorological data. In Wagerup we are at the base of the foothills and inversions are more intense here than on the coast. There is a build up in concentration. People in Wagerup have complained of numerous health problems like dizziness, blood noses etc.”

While not everyone in the Health Department or DEP “turned a blind eye,” they accepted the information provided by Alcoa. “With the DEP, we would like to see a change in culture, but this is yet to happen”.

Speaking of the role of successive Labor and Liberal State governments, Hill said: “For seven years this issue has been ongoing and there seems to be no urgency to safeguard peoples’ health.”

Asked about the role of the unions, he replied: “If you read submissions to the parliamentary inquiry, a union representative had said he didn’t know of any health problems with the workers, despite claims by their workers to the contrary. Some unions did fight for compensation and other unions did nothing.”

Referring to the list drawn up by the families of workers who had died or whose health was affected from working at Alcoa’s Kwinana plant, Hall explained that workers moved on the issue “because neither Alcoa nor the government were listening to their health fears from exposure at this refinery either”.



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