

Australia: Labor puts profits ahead of children's health at Port Pirie

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After feigning concern for children poisoned by its toxic emissions, Zinifex, the owner of the lead smelter in the South Australian city of Port Pirie, has shown its true colours. Following the company's annual general meeting in Melbourne on November 25, chief executive Greig Gailey blamed poor families living near the plant for the dangerous levels of lead that a recent study found in infants' blood.

South Australian Health Department results released in October showed that 60 percent of the 600 children tested under the age of 5 had blood lead levels above the World Health Organisation's safety limit of 10 micrograms per decilitre (10 mcg/dl). The average lead levels had jumped 9 percent in two years, producing two consecutive years of unsafe results.

The proven long-term effects of childhood lead poisoning include slow development, learning disabilities, hearing loss, reduced height and hyperactivity. High levels of lead in mothers could affect unborn children. While the test results were only slightly above the WHO limit, National Research Centre for Environmental Toxicology director Michael R. Moore said that world health experts decided 10 years ago that lead levels should be kept below 2 mcg/dl.

When the results were first published, the company made conciliatory noises about rectifying the problem and entered crisis talks with the state Labor government of Premier Mike Rann. The government quickly agreed to allow the smelter to stay open, pending further tests. Despite the clear evidence of harm, it proposed further testing of children to assess the effects on their intelligence levels.

Gailey's subsequent comments make plain Zinifex's real agenda. The company intends to keep boosting production at the 116-year-old smelter, the world's largest, in order to capitalise on current high world market prices for lead, regardless of the human cost. The smelter is located in the middle of the city.

Gailey claimed that an influx of low-income families on cheap land close to the smelter was a contributing factor in driving up the test results. "There is a link between low socio-economic groupings and where the high lead levels

are," he told reporters. He also blamed the federal government's first-home-owner's grant, introduced in 2000, for encouraging people to build homes near the smelter.

In reality, increased emissions escaping from the plant since 2003 have caused the rising lead blood levels. From the mid-1980s, the levels in babies and children had halved, then plateaued in 2000 and began to rise two years ago. The worst increases have occurred in the areas closest to the smelter or where winds carry the dust from the smelter.

Emission volumes are difficult to verify, because the current statistics are supplied by Zinifex itself. In 2002, the company reported that it emitted 30 tonnes of lead into the air, counting increased "fugitive emissions" in the form of dust. But figures obtained by the *Australian* from Zinifex showed that emissions were 46 tonnes in 2004-05, even after falling by 37 percent since 2000-01.

Estimates by the state Health Department are much higher—it has been quoted as putting total heavy metals emissions at 800 tonnes per year, including toxic cadmium and arsenic.

Previous Labor governments have permitted the plant to keep operating despite expert warnings about its damaging impact on children. In 1983, the Bannon Labor government contracted Philip Landrigan, a public health officer with the US Centre for Disease Control, to research the smelter's environmental effects. Landrigan, now a professor at the Mount Sinai School of Pediatrics in New York, warned there was a serious hazard to children's health. He recommended that consideration be given to relocating homes away from the most affected areas.

John Cornwall, who was health minister in the Bannon government, has now admitted that the ensuing decision not to move the town was based on "money ... and, of course, concern about (the smelter's) legal liability".

Bannon's government claimed that the poisoning of children was a result of exposure to historical contamination. In 1993, a government review found that this assumption was wrong—ongoing emissions were the cause. Nevertheless, the Arnold Labor government rejected another

recommendation to relocate the residents.

Instead of moving homes or closing the smelter, South Australian governments have spent a meagre \$30 million over the past 20 years on prevention and monitoring programs designed to reduce lead contamination. Some of the measures have included the demolition of 60 homes, and the decontamination of a further 2,200.

Most of these houses, however, were contaminated again within six months. Residents were simply told to be vigilant, wash their hands, keep dust levels down and clean their floors, which they did. People replaced the topsoil in their yards, removed rainwater tanks and pulled up their carpets.

After all this, one resident Gary Clarke-Vermeeren told the *Australian*: “We got the puddle outside the house tested and there was that much lead in there we could have sold it back to the smelter.” The Clarke-Vermeeren family had participated in the testing and other programs for two decades. One of their daughters was born with a blood lead level of 19 mcg/dl. “It’s like we are beating our head against a brick wall,” Janine Clarke-Vermeeren said. “You would think they would have been on top of it by now.”

Jane Stevens, who has five children, said: “It can be like fog coming down ... sometimes you can’t see anything but you know something is in the air because it’s burning your nose and you are smelling it.” Another resident said: “Come here for a look there at 3 o’clock or 4 o’clock in the morning and you see all the crap that comes out of the smelter when everybody is asleep. Even today I was out on the motorbike and you could taste the acid in the air.”

Officials have known of the continuing problem long before the current revelations. Internal Health Department documents from 2003 obtained by the *Australian* under Freedom of Information laws said: “The operating smelter is now known to cause substantial ongoing contamination of the city.” A review document stated: “Reducing blood lead levels to somewhere near the national goal would require enormous funding to relocate large parts of Port Pirie or closure of the smelter.”

Yet, to this day, no lead emission limits have been imposed on the smelter’s licence to operate. State Environment Minister John Hill and Environment Protection Authority (EPA) and Health Department officials met Zinifex executives on October 19 to discuss incorporating targets into the licence conditions. The details are due to be negotiated over the next few months.

Hill said the EPA and Zinifex were working on an Environmental Improvement Program to improve the air quality, with the aim of reducing blood lead levels below the WHO limit in 95 percent of Port Pirie’s under-4-year-olds by the end of 2010. There is no guarantee that even this target—which sentences children to another five years of

unsafe exposure—will be met. Zinifex will install the monitoring equipment and the company will be responsible for annual progress reports.

Behind the increased lead blood levels is the drive to maximise profits. Pasminco, which owned the smelter, collapsed in 2001 and then re-listed as Zinifex in 2004. Because of soaring world lead prices—up by \$300 a tonne over the past year—production has risen to a maximum of 245,000 tonnes per year.

Last year, Zinifex claimed to have made only \$15 million from the smelter. But in August this year it reported a bumper net profit of \$234 million. Yet, by its own claims, the company has spent only \$4 million on cutting emissions over the past 18 months and promised to spend a further \$12 million over the next three years.

Health Department official Ted Maynard warned last year that bringing children’s blood lead levels below the safe international standard would require shutting or shifting the smelter, or relocating high-risk residents. The government claimed it could not take such steps because of opposition from residents.

The smelter is the largest employer in Port Pirie, employing 700 people in a population of 14,000. In effect, residents are being forced to accept the high lead levels for economic reasons. The government has refused to offer compensation or pay for the cost of relocating the city. Its overriding concern is to increase corporate profitability and reduce social spending.

One year’s profits from the smelter would be sufficient to house the population in a safe area and provide decent roads to enable people to travel to work with ease, or, alternatively, close the plant and build a modern, safe facility. Such measures, however, will not be carried out within the current political and economic framework. They require the complete reorganisation of society along socialist lines, to make human needs the priority, rather than private profit.



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