Australia: Labor government rejects inquiry into impact of mining on health

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A television documentary on open cut coal mining in the Upper Hunter Valley in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) has revealed deep public concern over the resultant health problems. "A Dirty Business," aired on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" program on April 12, also showed increasing anger over the refusal of the state Labor government to address the issue.

Dr John Drinan, an agricultural scientist and a spokesman for the Singleton Shire Healthy Environment Group, told "Four Corners": "We have been sacrificed to the (coal) industry. If our health was an important issue for this government we would not have to be asking for help." He listed asthma, sinusitis, respiratory problems, allergies, eye problems and cancers among the ailments caused by pollution from mining and power generation.

Drinan said the group submitted a 40-page submission to the state government based on a survey of around 350 residents and a detailed analysis of publicly available air quality statistics. The group is calling for a comprehensive independent inquiry into health issues related to coal mining in the area, about 200 kilometres northwest of Sydney.

The government has not even acknowledged receiving the submission. After the "Four Corner's" program, NSW Health Minister Carmel Tebbutt issued a written statement declaring any investigation "would not be conclusive due to the relatively small population of the Upper Hunter Valley".

Tebbutt's real concern is that a health study would impact on the operations and profits of the coal companies. Like its counterparts in other states and federally, the NSW government has vested interests in protecting the companies, which are a major source of government revenue. Currently it draws over $1.4 billion annually in coal mining royalties, of which 60 percent comes from the Hunter Valley.

Several days before the "Four Corners" program, the media reported that five residents in a single suburban block in the mining town of Singleton had been diagnosed with brain tumours, raising the possibility of a cancer cluster. NSW Premier Kristina Keneally announced an "initial investigation" but within days NSW Health declared that the incidence of cancer was "most likely due to chance" and further investigations were "not likely to be useful".

The Upper Hunter Valley has 14 open cut mines extracting around 99 million tonnes of coal a year. Production in the area has trebled over the past three decades and is expected to double again in the next six years as mining companies take advantage of high demand from North East Asia, especially China.

Open cut mining produces continuous clouds of coal dust, containing a cocktail of toxins, that are carried by prevailing winds across wide areas of the region, including the regional towns of Singleton and Muswellbrook. The region also has two large coal-fired power stations, adding to pollution levels.

According to the "Four Corners" program, in 2008-09 mines around Singleton emitted 18 million kilograms of dust, 7.4 million kilograms of nitrogen oxides and 4.9 million kilograms of carbon monoxide.

In 2008, 113 tonnes of toxic metals and their compounds (including antimony, arsenic, cadmium, chromium, cobalt, lead, manganese, mercury, nickel, selenium and zinc) were emitted into the air of the Upper Hunter from mines and electricity generators. Some, like chromium, are carcinogenic.

The state government agreed last November to install "an air monitoring network" but only three of the 14 monitors can measure the extremely fine particles produced by blasting, bulldozers and burning of a coal seam. Gases from blasting are not normally monitored despite their toxicity.

Nick Higginbotham, an associate professor at the University of Newcastle's centre for clinical epidemiology and biostatistics, told "Four Corners" that such fine particles penetrate even further into the lungs and can get into the blood stream. "There's a range of diseases and illnesses that accrue

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from penetration of the lung system," he added.

Higginbotham had previously issued a report showing that in 2008, 1,500 tonnes of PM2.5 (air pollutants with a diameter of 2.5 micrometres or less) were emitted into the air over the Upper Hunter, a third of the emissions for the entire state. According to the World Health Organisation, there is no safe level of PM2.5. There are no Australian standards on these fine particles.

"Four Corners" reported that even when the monitoring system registers dust levels above the officially acceptable limit of 50 milligrams per cubic metre in a particular area, mines continue to operate and none are charged with an offence. Residents told the program that monitors on their properties have registered dust levels as high as 80 and 100. Such outcomes, however, are classified as an "accumulative effect", meaning the dust could be from several mines and therefore no one operation can be held accountable.

The results of a 2009 comparative study into the impact of open cut mining on health in the United States, entitled "Mortality from heart, respiratory, and kidney disease in coal mining areas of Appalachia," revealed unusually high mortality rates for respiratory, cardiac and kidney diseases in counties with open cut coal mines. Worst affected were populations near mines with extraction rates equal to or greater than 4 million tonnes over a four-year time period.

A study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* in 2008 of people living in close proximity to open-cast coal mines in west West Virginia recorded higher rates of cardiopulmonary disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, hypertension, lung disease and kidney disease, even after correcting for other factors such as smoking and poverty.

Frustrated by the NSW government's refusal to investigate the health issues, local GP Dr Tuan Au has begun his own study on respiratory health problems in the Upper Hunter Valley. Tests he ran on 900 local school children found one in six had a low lung function. The national average is one in twenty.

Dr Au submitted a report on his finding to the government but Health Minister Tebbutt dismissed it. "His work fails to advance knowledge about the link between emissions in the Upper Hunter and asthma in children," she declared. Au told "Four Corners": "If we ignore the problems and we do nothing about it, it's the same as murder."

The government's indifference to residents' concerns stands in sharp contrast to its treatment of the coal companies. It rapidly processes applications for new mining leases and extensions, and removes any impediment to mine operations. Just weeks ago, Aston Coal was given approval for an $8.5 million expansion of its operations near the village of Camberwell. Another eight expansions at various mines are awaiting approval.

The state government even took control of the Camberwell village common, after the trustees continued to reject the demand of Aston Coal for access. Lands Minister Tony Kelly contemptuously declared that the trustees "had refused to come to the negotiation table".

On April 14, Upper Hunter residents joined a protest rally called by the Greens outside the office of local state parliamentarian to press for a government-funded health inquiry. Such demands are designed to confine residents to pleading with the pro-business Labor government, which will never conduct any genuine enquiry into an industry on which both the state and national economies are highly reliant.

The Greens, who have just entered a coalition government with the Labor Party in Tasmania, are opposed to the development of an independent movement of working people—residents and mine and power workers alike—that would directly challenge the private profit system, which daily sacrifices the health and well-being of workers and ordinary people.

At the demonstration, Camberwell resident Diedre Olofsson told the WSWS that people in the Upper Hunter "had started fighting this (the health issue) 10 years ago when we realised the health of our children was going downhill".

"It is not just the pollution from mine dust but also from the power stations," Olofsson said. "The air is so full of toxic chemicals that we all suffer with health-related issues. Camberwell is surrounded on three sides by coal mines and power stations. Now they want build another mine that will completely surround the whole community.

"We have written numerous letters to local politicians and government ministers demanding an investigation into the air pollution. They send sympathetic and consolatory letters back promising to take up our issues but do nothing."

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