

SEP candidate demands immediate end to Tullamarine health hazard

**Peter Byrne, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Calwell
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Residents in the Melbourne suburbs of Gladstone Park and Westmeadows in the Calwell electorate are facing serious health risks as a result of chemical leakage and fumes from the nearby Tullamarine Hazardous Waste Landfill. The dump was closed in 2008, but the dangers have persisted due to totally inadequate remediation and capping works that have still not been completed.

Responsibility for the ongoing health hazard rests with the landfill operators, who cut corners to maximise profits, and successive Labor and Liberal state governments that stonewalled over demands for the dump's closure and systematically played down its dangers. From the outset, the overriding imperative has been to provide cheap toxic waste disposal for industry at the expense of workers and local residents.

The Socialist Equality Party demands that the state Labor government, with urgent assistance from the federal government, immediately provide the funds necessary to seal the dump to standards certified by independent experts and to thoroughly clean up the surrounding areas. As well, an independent medical investigation must be conducted to identify health problems among residents and landfill workers, past and present, who must be provided with free, comprehensive medical care and financial compensation.

Toxic waste management is big business. The cost of dumping a tonne of waste at the Tullamarine landfill in 2000 was about \$100, which translated into a \$70 million a year industry in the state of Victoria alone. The landfill operator is Cleanaway, which was a division of the global logistics corporation Brambles before it was sold in 2006 to the US equity firm, Kohlberg Kravis Roberts, for \$900 million.

Eleven months later Transpacific Industries, which already had extensive waste management operations in Australia and New Zealand, bought Cleanaway's Australian business for \$1.25 billion. Cleanaway's 65,000 customers, recycling

facilities, transfer stations and landfills came under the Transpacific portfolio.

The Tullamarine Hazardous Waste Landfill is a graphic example of the contempt of big business and government for the health of workers and local residents. The site was opened in 1972 in a disused stone quarry. Until 1985, the liquid waste formed a poisonous chemical lake. Fires at the dump would burn for days, emitting dangerous dioxins and other harmful gases.

Year after year concerned residents who complained to the Environment Protection Agency (EPA), local parliamentarians and state government, were fobbed off. Federal Labor MP Alan Griffiths wrote to a local resident in May 1986 declaring that the state government had announced the site would shut down by 1990. "It is impossible to close it immediately as no alternative site currently exists," the letter stated.

But nothing was done. A report by the state government's Hazardous Waste Consultative Committee published in April 2000 detailed the scale of the problem. Every year approximately 400,000 tonnes of solid and 300,000 tonnes of liquid toxic waste produced by industry in Victoria had to be dumped somewhere.

The committee's priorities were obvious. "A competitive, cost effective hazardous waste management industry is an essential component of the Victorian industry cycle," the report declared. The problem was that investment in treatment facilities utilising new technology was being "hindered by the relative low cost of landfill".

Not surprisingly, the Tullamarine landfill site continued to be used for another eight years, because the costs to government and business of a safe, modern treatment facility were considered too high. The continuing impact on the health of local residents and workers was simply dismissed.

The current standard for toxic waste dumps stipulates a five-kilometre buffer zone. The buffer for the Tullamarine site is just 500 metres, yet the health risks have been consistently played down by government and business alike. A state government study into health effects of the landfill site in 2006 included suburbs up to 10 kilometres away. Its conclusion was that residents near the dump were no more at risk of cancer than anywhere else in Melbourne.

Studies by the Terminate Tullamarine Toxic Dump Action Group (TTTDAG) found the opposite. Their first report in May 2010, based on a survey of 154 of the 6,200 residents living within four kilometres of the dump, detailed 74 cases of cancer including 33 cancer deaths. A second study, released last month, found another 68 cancer cases, identified five cancer clusters and estimated the cancer rate at four times the Melbourne average. The TTTDAG has also found cases of former landfill employees with cancer.

At the very least, the TTTDAG studies presented a prima facie case that warranted further government investigation. Yet, in comments on ABC radio, the state environment minister Gavin Jennings dismissed the 142 cancer cases as an unfortunate “part of normal living” and blamed people for “choosing” to live close to the landfill.

As for the Environment Protection Agency, it has offered no protection for the environment or for the people who live in it. An Auditor General’s report, released in June this year, concluded that the “EPA is not effectively regulating commerce and industry’s management of hazardous waste”. The EPA’s activities “lack coherence”; there was a “lack of data reliability”; and there was “neither sound compliance monitoring nor effective enforcement regimes”.

With a federal election underway and a state election due in November, state and federal parliamentarians have been scrambling to neutralise the Tullamarine toxic dump as a campaign issue. State environment minister Jennings, who earlier rejected the TTTDAG studies, has now announced a new EPA/Cancer Council inquiry—with results to be announced after the November election. Local state Labor parliamentarian Liz Beattie and her federal Labor counterpart Maria Vamvakinou have both offered encouraging, but completely empty, words of advice to protesting residents.

No faith should be placed in either the EPA inquiry or Labor’s new rhetoric. Around the world, corporate interests, in collusion with governments, operate to maximise profits

with reckless disregard for the environment or the lives of working people. What has been graphically exposed in the catastrophic oil spill caused by BP in the Gulf of Mexico is replicated on a smaller scale in the Tullamarine toxic landfill and countless other places in Australia and around the world.

Workers and residents should make a careful study of the findings of the Workers Inquiry into the Wollongong Leukaemia and Cancer Crisis, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party in 1997 into the alarming incidence of cancer in areas close to that city’s huge BHP steel mill. The inquiry’s findings provided compelling scientific evidence that BHP’s operations were responsible for a major local cancer cluster and exposed the complicity of the New South Wales state Labor government, the trade unions, the regional public health unit, the Environment Protection Agency and the Cancer Council in covering up for the corporate giant.

As in every other aspect of life, the working class can only rely on the mobilisation of its own independent political strength. Local residents are clearly angry and determined to expose and rectify the health problems created by the Tullamarine toxic dump, but if their perspective is limited to pressuring governments and their agencies they will inevitably be disappointed. It is necessary to turn out to other sections of workers facing similar problems on the basis of a socialist program directed at the root cause of these disasters—the profit system itself.

Ending industrial pollution and its impact on the health and lives of working people can only be assured by abolishing capitalism and establishing a world, planned socialist economy to meet the interests of the vast majority of humanity, not the profits of the wealthy few. The major banks and corporations, including the toxic waste profiteers, must be placed under public ownership, democratically controlled by the working class. Only in that way can the resources created by workers be utilised to provide decent living standards and a safe environment for all. That is the perspective for which the Socialist Equality Party and its candidates are fighting in this election.



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