

Australia: Victorian government buries toxic dump as election issue

Peter Byrne, SEP candidate for Broadmeadows
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The Victorian state government is doing its utmost to head off anger among residents over an apparent cancer cluster in Melbourne's northern suburbs around the Tullamarine Hazardous Waste Landfill. Having earlier announced another official investigation into the issue, the government maintains that it can take no action until after it receives the findings. These are due before the end of the year but—conveniently for Premier John Brumby—not before the state election on November 27.

The government's handling of the issue is a case study of the contempt with which the Labor Party holds the working class.

The Tullamarine toxic dump operated from 1972 until 2008, when it was finally closed after decades of community protest. During its three and a half decades of operations, nearby residents in the working class suburbs of Tullamarine, Gladstone Park and Westmeadows breathed fumes and smoke from noxious chemical fires. Chemicals such as liquid polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), well known carcinogens, were among the material disposed of at the site. Even since the dump's closure, gas emissions and ground water pollution have continued.

In May a report was issued by the Terminate Tullamarine Toxic Dump Action Group (TTTDAG), revealing 74 cases of cancer, discovered in a targeted survey of 154 of the 6,200 residents living within a four-kilometre radius of the site. By July, following the initial publicity, local residents notified the group of further cancers making the total 142. Lymphoma, myeloma, and pancreatic cancers were reported at especially high rates. With yet more affected residents coming forward since July, the total number of reported cancers has reached 194.

While the survey was a limited one—unavoidably so, given that the residents were forced to conduct it with their own resources—it raised many serious questions. The findings exposed an official health study conducted in 2006 which concluded that households near the dump were not at any greater risk of contracting cancer. This was based on a review of cancer rates in suburbs up to 10 kilometres away from the toxic dump, which skewed the findings by excluding a focussed examination of the households nearest the site.

Environment Minister Gavin Jennings responded to the

TTTDAG survey earlier this year by declaring that cancer was “a feature of daily life for unfortunately thousands of people round the world, whether they live near a landfill or whether they don't”. For good measure, he blamed the residents for their ill-health, saying that “many people have chosen to live in this locality while the landfill was operating”.

The remarks of Jennings—a senior member of the Labor Party's Socialist Left faction—pointed to the Brumby government's indifference to the plight of working people. His statements were issued at the same time as he announced that the government would commission another investigation into the apparent cancer cluster, to be carried out by the Cancer Council of Victoria and overseen by the Environment Protection Authority (EPA).

No confidence can be placed in this process. Brumby and the EPA are directly responsible for potentially endangering people's lives and yet now claim the authority can mount an objective investigation. Moreover, the EPA's track record during the Labor government's tenure in office is one of facilitating the interests of corporate polluters, at the expense of the health and safety of ordinary people.

An Auditor General's report issued in June noted that as a result of the 2009 introduction of “self regulation” in the industrial waste disposal industry, EPA “compliance activities have significantly decreased since 2007–08 while the opportunity and incentive for non-compliance has increased.” The report noted that from a high of 745 inspections across the state in 2005–06, the number of inspections in 2008–09 was just 176—“a decrease of 569, or 76 percent”.

As part of the government's move to corporate “self-regulation”, the EPA now requests hazardous waste licencees to submit annual “self-assessments” on their compliance with licence conditions. Less than half of these assessments are reviewed by the EPA.

As a further consequence of Labor's pro-business deregulatory reforms of the toxic waste industry, “self regulation” permits hazardous waste producers to classify their own waste. The more toxic that industrial waste is, the more expensive it tends to be to dump, establishing financial incentives for operators to reclassify

the material they are disposing. In addition, if toxic waste from one producer can be used as raw material by another producer, it is no longer classified as hazardous and the EPA does not track its transport or disposal.

The Auditor General concluded that the EPA is “not effectively regulating commerce and industry’s management of hazardous waste ... there is neither sound compliance, monitoring nor effective enforcement regimes [and] as a consequence, there is little assurance that hazardous waste is stored and disposed of appropriately”.

The situation revealed in the Auditor General’s report is the direct outcome of the profit system’s subordination of basic social needs, including that of a safe environment, to the interests of big business and the ultra-wealthy. The same drive to maximise profits has seen the breakdown of regulatory mechanisms around the world, triggering environmental catastrophes such as the recent oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

The disposal of hazardous waste in Australia is a multi-billion dollar industry. Profits are also supplemented by government subsidies. *Inside Waste Weekly* last month reported that Transpacific Industries Group (TPI), which owns the Tullamarine toxic waste dump, is the beneficiary of a \$3.6 million handout from the Victorian government. This is part of the EPA’s \$19 million HazWaste Fund for industrial polluters, supposedly sponsoring projects aimed at reducing hazardous waste.

The EPA’s subservience to the waste companies has been noted even by state authorities. In 2008, residents at the newly built Brookland Greens housing estate in Melbourne’s southeast were forcibly evacuated after dangerously high concentrations of methane gas from a nearby closed landfill were found in their homes, (see “Australia: Methane gas landfill leak forces residents to evacuate suburb”). A state Ombudsman’s report released last year found that “by allowing economic considerations to override environmental imperatives, the EPA failed to set conditions for the discharge of waste into the environment”.

A similar failure has occurred with the Tullamarine toxic dump. Despite being closed since 2008, the issue of how to safely contain the still hazardous materials has been effectively determined on the basis of reducing costs for the landfill’s operators.

Closed landfills are covered with a “cap” of near impervious clay that prevents rainwater entering and percolating through the waste and leaching out contaminated water. The cap for the Tullamarine dump was designed in 2001—when the dump was first meant to be closed—and clay lining of half a metre was proposed. In 2008 the EPA issued new guidelines that recommended a minimum of one metre of clay for landfills with non-hazardous waste, such as household refuse. Residents argued that the highly toxic waste at Tullamarine would therefore require a cap at least one metre thick, and more reasonably two metres. The EPA’s response was to steadfastly defend the 2001 design, flouting its

own guidelines.

Last month Kaylene Wilson of the TTTDAG told the *Hume Leader* that the EPA was also “dragging its heels” on a previous pledge to undertake comprehensive air monitoring at the site. This basic safety measure has still not commenced.

Despite this record, the Greens have rushed to the defence of the Brumby government. Colleen Hartland, a member of the Victorian Legislative Council, has been promoted by her party as a “champion in parliament” for those affected by the Tullamarine toxic dump and other industrial landfills—but her real function has been to contain residents’ anger. After the damning Auditor General report was issued earlier this year, Hartland declared that “the government did respond very appropriately”. She expressed hope that “we will see a completely different culture at the EPA, because unless that happens and unless tough action is taken communities will still have no confidence in the EPA”.

The lack of confidence in the EPA is entirely warranted. The authority’s “culture” is not something that can be refashioned at will. Along with government policy, it is driven by the demands of big business, not by the needs of local residents. Any campaign to rectify the environmental and health problems created by the Tullamarine dump must be based on a socialist program directed at the root cause of such disasters—the profit system itself. The Socialist Equality Party is the only party fighting for that perspective in the state election.

The author also recommends:

SEP candidate demands immediate end to Tullamarine health hazard

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Click here for the coverage of the SEP Victorian election campaign

Authorised by Nick Beams, 113/55 Flemington Rd, North Melbourne 3051



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