

Victorian government releases another whitewash of Tullamarine toxic dump hazard

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The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) released on Monday another investigation, “Tullamarine Landfill Community Health and Environment Report”, which finds that no health hazard exists near a former toxic dump in the northern Melbourne suburb of Tullamarine, despite residents’ reports of an apparent cancer cluster. No confidence whatsoever can be placed in the EPA’s emphatic insistence that the dump area is safe. The methodology of the latest investigation is highly questionable. Moreover, government authorities have made every effort to prevent any serious scrutiny of their findings and to suppress any genuine discussion among local residents, clearly indicating that a calculated whitewash is underway.

From the very beginning of the Tullamarine toxic dump’s operations, successive Labor and Liberal state governments demonstrated utter contempt for the concerns of residents and prioritised the profit interests of corporate operators above the health of local people. The dump operated from 1972 until 2008, accepting hazardous liquid waste until the mid-80s. There is no record of the type of chemicals in some 30 million litres of waste dumped in the disused quarry. Over the life of the dump, residents continually complained of gases and chemical odours, but were fobbed off by the EPA. Fires burning in the lakes of highly toxic liquid lasted for days and residents were forced to breathe the acrid smoke.

A minimal 500-metre buffer separates houses in the nearby working class suburbs of Tullamarine, Gladstone Park and Westmeadows from the dump, despite current standards dictating an exclusion zone ten times that distance.

The landfill’s original operator was Cleanaway, a division of the global logistics corporation Brambles. It is now owned by Transpacific Industries, which paid more than a billion dollars for the waste business in 2007.

In 2006, the state Labor government of Premier John Brumby commissioned a health study that concluded that the incidence of cancer near the toxic dump was no higher than the state average. Residents roundly rejected the report. The area selected for examination in the study extended 10 kilometres from the dump, including areas unaffected by the dump’s toxins, apparently in order to dilute any cancer clusters closer to it. A significantly

higher than normal rate of pre-term births was nevertheless discovered, but was dismissed as being due to socio-economic factors.

Residents continued to gather significant anecdotal evidence of far more prevalent than average health problems in the area, including respiratory and skin diseases, birth defects and cancers. Local protest group, Terminate Tullamarine Toxic Dump Action Group (TTTDAG), conducted a limited survey and issued reports in May and July 2010, which suggested that cancer rates could be four times higher than the average.

Labor’s environment minister Gavin Jennings responded with unconcealed hostility to the residents’ continued campaign, 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”. The government nevertheless announced a new investigation—but ensured that the findings would not be released until after the Victorian state election, which was held last November.

On behalf of the Socialist Equality Party, I wrote at the time: “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.”

This warning has been borne out with the release of the latest EPA investigation. It comprises three sub-reports. The investigation into residents’ concerns about cancer clusters involved the most limited statistical analysis by the Victoria Cancer Registry, mapping reported cases of cancer between 1982 and 2008 among people residing within a four-kilometre radius of the toxic dump. No effort was made to track any cancers among residents who had moved out of the area after being exposed to the dump’s toxins. This was despite the fact that a higher than average turnover rate could be expected among those who lived in houses closer to the dump, who were most affected by its smell. Nor were any cancer cases tracked among workers at the dump, or in nearby

areas, including Melbourne airport. Moreover, no health problems other than certain types of cancers were studied.

The second sub-report was a review of the earth cap that has been installed over the top of the dump since its closure in 2008. Two American landfill industry experts assessed the cap and stated that, while it was not best practice, it was adequate. The third sub-report dealt with air quality in the area. The report made clear that carcinogenic benzene, vinyl chloride and trichloroethylene were being released into the air but in “safe” quantities. TTTDAG claimed that monitoring was sporadic and extremely limited.

These reports beggar belief. International studies have demonstrated clear links between toxic dumps and serious health problems. A recent American investigation found a 12 percent increase in the risk of congenital malformations in the vicinity of 590 hazardous waste sites in New York State. A European multi-site study reported a 33 percent increase in non-chromosomal birth defects for residents living within 3 kilometres of 21 hazardous waste sites in 10 European regions.

The EPA refused to release the reports prior to the first of four public “open house” sessions that are being held this week in the Broadmeadows and Tullamarine area. Residents demands for a public meeting, where questions could be openly asked of and answered by the EPA and its nominated scientists, were rejected. Instead, the “open house” meetings are designed for individual residents to move around separate information booths manned by numerous EPA officials. The authors of the reports have absented themselves. The entire process is designed to intimidate and atomise residents and prevent any joint community discussion of the issues.

SEP campaigners spoke with residents attending the first EPA event on Monday. Alan Free, who has suffered prostate cancer and lost his wife to breast cancer, said, “I’m very sceptical of the whole procedure. We’ve lived under the shadow of untruths for many years. And we’re still living under that shadow. Where was [report author] Professor Giles? If you’re going to have a forum, you produce the authors. I wanted to talk to and listen to the professor.”

Lolita said, “I think with the format of the meeting they were trying to avoid confrontation and conflict, trying to give their spin without contradiction. For me, I don’t believe it gives an accurate picture, because it doesn’t include people who have moved out of the area or who worked at the airport.” Another resident, Pat, said: “The whole thing was a whitewash. To the lay person it looked great, but we know better. The EPA people were very well rehearsed. We’re not scientifically inclined so it is difficult for us to ask the appropriate questions.”

The Socialist Equality Party demands a fully resourced and comprehensive health investigation, dealing with all aspects of the health of workers at the dump and airport, residents past and present, soil contamination and air quality, and overseen by a

committee of residents and scientists.

The establishment of the dump in the first place was driven by industry requirements for cheap toxic waste disposal at a site close to the industrial centre of Melbourne. Over the years, the role of government—through its EPA—has been to allow the operators to minimise costs, maximise profits and essentially do whatever they liked. Fixing the health hazard would likely cost significant sums. The resources exist, but they are not being made available to properly clean up the dump because, under the profit system, decisions are made on the basis of the material interests of the ultra-wealthy, not the social needs of the population as a whole.

In the face of the government’s systematic cover up, the SEP encourages Tullamarine residents to study the 1997 Workers Inquiry into the Wollongong Leukaemia and Cancer Crisis, which was initiated by the SEP after local workers complained of the alarming incidence of cancer in areas close to the BHP steel mill. The inquiry, conducted independently of the government, found compelling scientific evidence that BHP’s operations were responsible for a major local cancer cluster. The SEP exposed the complicity of the New South Wales state Labor government, the trade unions, the regional public health unit, the EPA and the Cancer Council in covering up for the corporate giant.

I am standing in the Broadmeadows by-election in order to urge workers in the electorate, throughout the country and internationally to develop their own independent organisations to defend their own class interests. In the case of the toxic dump, a committee must be formed, which is independent of the EPA, the trade unions, and all the parliamentary parties, Liberal, Labor and the Greens. The most critical task is the development of a new political leadership. A perspective based on utilising the social wealth created by society to provide clean and safe living and working environments must be adopted. That requires a socialist and internationalist program, aimed at the overthrow of the private profit system and the establishment of a rationally planned, socialist society.



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