

Australia: Residents condemn chemical company Orica over toxic leaks

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23 August 2011

Executives from the Australian-based transnational chemical manufacturer Orica were grilled by angry residents of Stockton, a coastal suburb of the New South Wales industrial city of Newcastle, at a packed meeting on August 18.

Residents are furious over the company's cover up of a serious leak of up to 10 kilograms of the carcinogen hexavalent chromium from its sprawling Kooragang Island ammonium-nitrate facility. The plant is close to residential suburbs and water treatment facilities and an unspecified amount of the poison was vented into the atmosphere.

The August 8 spill occurred during a start-up procedure that takes place around every five years. About 25 workers were on site at the time and some were directly splashed with a yellow substance. They were eventually sent home after being ordered to shower.

The Stockton meeting, held in a large tent on the foreshore of the city's Hunter River, was organised by the company supposedly to address residents' concerns. It was nothing more than a cynical exercise in damage control to play down the health danger.

Just one day after the meeting, the company released 1.2 megalitres of effluent into the Hunter River containing levels of arsenic in excess of the amount allowed under its operational licence.

The initial leak took place on the night of August 8 but residents were not informed by Orica or government authorities for 54 hours. As a result, people—including children at a local play centre—not only inhaled fumes but came into contact with the toxic yellow and red residue that had settled on homes, gardens and play equipment.

Orica did not inform the environmental regulator of

the spill, as required by law, until 10.30 a.m. the following morning. NSW Environment Minister Robyn Parker was told of the leak by the Office of Environment and Heritage at 4.23 p.m. on August 10 but made no public statement until almost 24 hours later.

The NSW state Liberal government of Barry O'Farrell belatedly announced an inquiry into the incident. The government, however, is implicated in the cover up and will do everything possible to prevent a genuine investigation. Parker's actions were not even included in the inquiry's terms of reference.

People at the Stockton meeting reacted with anger when Orica's general manager of mining James Bonner first apologised for the leak and then declared cynically, "we are all hurting at Orica." Later he claimed there were side benefits from the incident, saying it had "provided the company with a learning opportunity" to review its emergency response plan.

Many people at the meeting demanded to know why Orica failed to alert the public or call the state emergency services' Hazmat unit. Orica executives claimed that the circumstances that produced the leak had never occurred before, so no emergency response plan existed.

Company representatives declared that tests had shown that the toxic emissions "did not present a risk to health." But residents pointed out that because of Orica's deliberate delay in reporting the incident, some samples were not taken until several days after the spill.

Residents reported noticeable health impacts in the days following the leak. One woman told the meeting her children had been sick for days and one had to be taken to hospital twice, suffering nose bleeding. Other residents reported family members suffering from headaches, and sore and red eyes. Children had

developed rashes from playing in gardens.

Orica issued an information sheet on August 15—a week after the leak—warning residents to “wash any yellowish brown droplets off cars, outdoor objects or surfaces with tap water,” empty rain water tanks, “not to eat home grown leafy vegetables,” wash their hands before eating or smoking and prevent children from “playing in the garden” unless the lawn has been heavily washed down.

An Australian offshoot of the British giant ICI, Orica is one of the world’s biggest manufacturers of mining and commercial explosives, and other chemical products used in mining, water treatment and other industries.

The chromium and arsenic leaks are not exceptions. The company has breached its operating licence in nine of the past ten years, with 131 breaches recorded over that period. Nonetheless, Orica has never received a prevention, clean-up or penalty notice from the state regulator.

The Labor Party opposition feigned outrage at the spill, while seeking to divert the anger of residents into the dead-end of a parliamentary inquiry. All the company’s previous breaches took place under a Labor government which systematically protected major corporate polluters and ignored the health and other concerns of working people. In Wollongong, another major industrial city in the state, Labor rammed through special legislation to reopen the Port Kembla lead smelter in 1997, and cleared BHP Billiton of all responsibility for a cluster of leukaemia and other cancers downwind of its steelworks throughout the 1990s (See: “Wollongong steelworks pumps out dangerous dioxins: Report confirms Workers Inquiry findings”).

As for the trade unions, they immediately sought to protect Orica, brushing aside the health dangers for the company’s workers. About 15 union members met union officials outside the gate for about an hour before returning to work. John Boyd, the assistant secretary of the Newcastle branch of the Australian Workers Union, assured the media that other workers had stayed on the job to keep the plant running and there was no industrial action. Boyd indicated that the union was working with the company to defuse local anger and concern. He said the union had “made suggestions to the company about a working group to help work on

transparent communications to the community.”

Grace Evans, who attended Orica’s meeting with residents, told the WSWs she believed the company was lying when it said the leak posed no risk to peoples’ health.

“I have five kids at home. My children have been exposed and I am concerned. I grow parsley in my garden and have been putting it on my kids’ food every night to help with an iron deficiency. The company did not tell me that the plants could have been affected. The company is saying they have done a really good cleanup. All they did at my home was to wash the house and garden down with water.

“We have had all this stuff by the Gillard government about stopping pollution by having a tax on carbon but companies like Orica can get away with leaking toxic chemicals into the atmosphere and nothing is done about it. I think that the way the company reacted over the latest incident shows it cannot be trusted to care about the impact of its operation on health and the environment.”

Another resident, Ian Graham, condemned the company’s response and voiced similar concerns for his three children. “The first I heard of the leak was when a newspaper reporter knocked on my door. The first official notification I got from Orica was August 16.

“The day they came to clean the house up they were there for around ten minutes. They washed down four walls and wiped the trampoline poles and mat. We have trees in the backyard with leaves now showing signs of being burnt.

“My 11-year-old went outside and touched the ground. We got her into the shower straight away but her face became swollen with blotches. The doctor said it was likely caused by the chemicals from the leak.

“The company is telling us there is no health risk but I think that is all rubbish and a cover up by Orica, and the government is helping them. I think heads should roll, not only in the company but in the government as well.”



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