

Australia: Residents denounce Orica cover-up

Our correspondents
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Residents of the industrial city of Newcastle, 170 kilometres north of Sydney, have been affected by a series of serious leaks from chemical company Orica's Kooragang Island ammonium-nitrate plant over the past four months.

The most serious spill occurred on August 8 when 20 kilograms of carcinogenic hexavalent chromium were emitted into the atmosphere, depositing a yellow residue in the nearby suburb of Stockton. (See: "Another serious chemical leak by Orica")

Despite the company being in the public spotlight, two further incidents occurred. One, on August 19, involved the release of 1.2 megalitres of effluent into the Hunter River containing concentrations of arsenic above the levels permitted by the company's operating licence.

On November 9, 900 kilograms of ammonia leaked into the atmosphere and drifted across to the suburb of Mayfield, resulting in two railway workers being overcome by fumes and temporarily hospitalised.

Stockton residents spoke to the WSWs about Orica's record of pollution and the New South Wales Liberal state government and parliamentary official inquiries into the August 8 incident.

Kay Twomey suffers from a serious respiratory problem and is concerned about the leaks from the Orica plant as well as the level of pollution from other nearby industries, including the high levels of dust from coal loading operations.

Twomey said she had no faith in the official inquiries into Orica and no trust in either the Liberal or Labor parties: "Let's face it, Orica has been getting away with breaches of its licence for years, during which time there have been changes of government and many different state premiers. Quite frankly, no one from either party has given a damn.

"They say today, we will do this and we will do that, but let's just look at the situation in ten or twelve

months time, and we will see that nothing has really changed and Orica will have gotten away with all of this. Frankly, it's been governments that have given Orica and other companies the right to pollute.

"The incident on August 8 and the other leaks have drawn public attention to a longstanding problem but I think the company and government are working hard to ensure everything goes back to normal. Nothing will be done to resolve the problem, not even if there is another change of government."

Sate Warwick and her husband **Mark** commented that although Orica and various government agencies had said the leak on August 8 posed no serious health risk, they were worried about the cumulative effects of pollution from Orica and other industries.

Sate said: "The whole of Kooragang Island is chock full of industries, together with the coal loader. Combined they must put out high levels of pollution, but it seems to be unmonitored.

"I have no confidence in official inquiries or the government. The company knew the inquiries had been called into the August leak, yet there is another leak. The government and politicians are not concerned about the people, only about the big companies. The Labor Party will not do anything either—they only act when there is something in it for them."

Mark agreed: "The Labor Party has to share a large portion of the responsibility for what is happening with Orica. They were in power for years. The same issues were happening then and nothing was done."

Adolf, a retired builder who has lived in Stockton for 31 years, is very concerned about the pollution of the Hunter River caused by the operations of Orica and other companies.

"The pollution has been going on for over 30 years. It is just as bad now as it was then. I have fished from Maitland down to Newcastle. The pollution first came

from the coal mines up near Maitland and the BHP steel works. Now it is coming from the chemical plants.

“I have seen hundreds of fish floating dead all along the river. I stopped catching fish years ago when they started growing cancers or something like it. My friend Dave has a commercial fishing licence but stopped fishing the river years ago because of the pollution.

“I used to complain a lot to people in the city council and politicians. I don’t know. No one listened then and they won’t now.”

James Elder, who has lived in Stockton for 23 years, said: “The pollution was here when I moved here. It improved a bit when the BHP steelworks closed, but it is back again now. I think it’s worse because of the industrial activity on Kooragang Island.

“The coal dust from the coal loaders is becoming a big problem. My wife and I are constantly washing down windows and the rest of the house. I complained to the people responsible for the coal loaders. They sent someone to the house who tried to tell me the black dust was from trucks driving past my house. Hardly any trucks drive past my house.

“Orica is just as bad. They have been causing pollution for a long time. About 10 years ago the local bowling greens got covered in an orange substance overnight. The club rang Orica, which admitted it was from their plant. They didn’t say what it was, other than saying, ‘don’t worry, it won’t kill your grass.’

“What worries me is that spills are happening and we don’t know about it. Orica has never notified me of any spills. I don’t think Orica cares about anyone except their share holders. They have shown that they can’t or won’t control their emissions, so they should go where they can’t affect the population. I have no faith in the politicians to resolve this.”

Chris Tobin, a retired builder who has lived directly opposite Orica for five years, commented: “I see a lot of pollution coming from the chimney stacks, especially at night—all different colours. We also get a lot of different smells in the air. We are constantly washing down the windows and the house.

“Puddles of water get a red residue settle in them after just a few days. We are constantly getting rashes on our bodies and seem to cough a lot. Every so often we get red and sore eyes.

“I know a lot of fisherman around here. They have complained to the fisheries department about the

pollution in the river, but were told there was nothing the department could do. The trawling boat operators said that before they head out to sea they have to hose their decks to get rid of fallout from Orica, so their catch does not get contaminated.

“Just like when the major spill occurred in August we were not notified about the November 9 ammonia spill. I first heard about it when the local TV station turned up on my door step wanting to interview me. Orica told us after the August spill that they would improve their warning system for the residents, such as installing a siren, but this hasn’t happened. I have no faith in the government or the local community action groups to fix this. Appealing to politicians is useless.”



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