

Workers and residents exposed to asbestos in Australia

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5 June 2013

Another scandalous example of government and corporate contempt for working class lives and health has come to light. On at least 20 occasions this year, workers employed in the roll-out of optic fibre cabling for the National Broadband Network (NBN) have “mishandled” material containing asbestos. In one documented incident, in Sydney’s western suburb of Penrith, asbestos was scattered in a residential area, exposing the workers and other people to the potentially cancer-causing consequences of inhaling it.

The Labor government launched the NBN in 2009. It is one of Labor’s key policies, aimed at lifting the international competitiveness of Australian business by providing the physical infrastructure for high speed Internet connections. It will run optic fibre cabling to 93 percent of businesses and homes by the end of the decade, while providing satellite and wireless services to more remote areas. Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her ministers tout it as the “largest nation building infrastructure project in Australian history.” Originally estimated to cost \$37 billion, it is being laid out by a government-owned corporate entity, NBNCo.

Telstra, the former state-owned telecommunications corporation that was privatised between 1997 and 2006, stills owns the existing physical infrastructure. It entered into an agreement with NBNCo to “remediate” Telstra’s network to facilitate the NBN roll-out. The remediation involves repairing access “pits,” cleaning them of decades of accumulated debris and making them accessible for NBNCo contractors to thread new cabling through pipes that contain old copper phone line wiring.

From the beginning, the Labor government, NBNCo, Telstra and the trade unions were well aware that the “remediation” would bring workers, and potentially residents, into contact with asbestos. The oldest 10 to

20 percent of the estimated eight million pits around the country were built with the material. In 2009, Telstra management, in an exchange of emails with Labor Party powerbroker Bill Shorten, now workplace relations minister, explicitly ruled out removing the asbestos from all the contaminated sites, saying it would cost too much.

Everyone knew what safeguards were needed. Documents such as Telstra’s 2012 “Asbestos Management Procedures” are easily accessible online. Those procedures state that if there is any doubt about whether a pit was constructed with asbestos, it must be assumed that it was. Strict safety measures must be followed, involving protective clothing, staff training, enclosing the site and notifying residents. The document also specifies that any company contracted by Telstra must abide by the same safety standards.

It seems that NBN remediation has not been carried out according to these standards. Telstra contracted the work to other companies, such as Service Stream, which last December was awarded a \$420 million contract to remediate pits in New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory. In the Penrith area, Service Stream passed on the work to an unnamed subcontractor.

On May 7, the subcontractor began working on pits in front of Matthew O’Farrell’s home. O’Farrell told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) this week that he saw a group of workers on May 8 “hitting the concrete pits with sledgehammers, picks and crowbars. It [concrete dust] was all over my driveway, my yard, my bins, and also the gentlemen. Anything they touched or came into contact with, or wherever they have walked, they have possibly spread this material.” His aunt told the ABC that O’Farrell’s six-year

daughter and her friend played amid the rubble.

The subcontractor's employees were not using protective breathing equipment or clothing. They were reportedly handling the broken-up material with their bare hands and clearly had no knowledge of the risks of asbestos. O'Farrell only found out that their work was associated with the NBN via online searches. Three days later, WorkCover, the health and safety authority, notified him that the concrete contained asbestos and the contractor had been "suspended."

Telstra representatives did not meet with O'Farrell and his neighbours until May 25. The next day—18 days after the exposure and with no cleanup of the site having taken place—O'Farrell and his neighbour Troy Lancaster and their families were told they had to evacuate their homes because of the risk and move to a nearby hotel. Service Stream did not recommence remediation work on the pits, with crews trained to deal with asbestos, until May 30.

O'Farrell told the ABC: "The first time I found out it was asbestos, my stomach sank... I just hope over the next 20 years I'm not having to say to my children that they've got this [cancer] from living in that house." Lancaster is demanding that Telstra buy his property, which he considers unliveable and unsellable.

In a transparent bid at political damage control, workplace minister Shorten met with the families on June 1. A crisis meeting involving the government, Telstra, NBN and the unions was held on Monday. Legislation was rushed through parliament the same day to establish an "Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency" and a national register of people who may have suffered an exposure.

The Penrith case is just the tip of the iceberg, however. In the past 48 hours, it has been revealed that 20 cases of asbestos mishandling at Telstra pits have been reported since January 1—compared with just 10 over the preceding 16 years. Instances are now known in the Brisbane suburbs of Banyo and Carseldine, the regional Queensland town of Mackay, the regional Victorian city of Ballarat, the Perth suburb of Victoria Park, and Seaford in South Australia. There are also concerns over work carried out in the Tasmanian city of Launceston.

In Carseldine, the Queensland attorney-general reported that "high-pressure water was used to clean a telecommunications pit containing asbestos. Debris was

observed on the faces and clothes of two workers."

The sharp spike in incidents follows growing political embarrassment for the Labor government over the delays and cost blowouts in the NBN project. In October 2012, NBNCo admitted that the roll-out had fallen at least one year behind schedule. It had signed up just 26,000 connections—barely 10 percent of its forecast. Its executives had nevertheless collectively awarded themselves \$600,000 in bonuses.

The delays in western Sydney were of particular concern to the Labor government. While it denied that the area had been selected for early connection to the NBN for political reasons, the government faces the loss of a number of seats there in the September election. A faster Internet was to be one of its few election promises.

On February 1, journalist Renai LeMay had reported claims on delimiter.com.au, an IT news website, that delays in Telstra's remediation work were the main factor slowing down the NBN in the Penrith area. Obvious questions arise. Was pressure brought to bear on Telstra by the Labor government and NBNCo to speed up the remediation before the election? Was Telstra in turn pressuring Service Stream and therefore its various subcontractors?

Whether that is the case or not, one thing is clear: the Labor government and the unions have done nothing to monitor the NBN remediation and ensure that proper safety procedures protected workers and residents from asbestos exposure. The health of working people has been compromised in the interests of cost-cutting, corporate profit and political expediency.



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