

SEP campaigners investigate asbestos exposure in Sydney's west

Our correspondents

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As part of its 2013 election campaign, SEP teams have begun to investigate revelations in the working-class suburb of Penrith, in Sydney's west, that work associated with the Labor government's National Broadband Network (NBN) has resulted in workers and residents being exposed to asbestos, a potentially deadly substance.

Telstra, which owns the physical telecommunications infrastructure throughout Australia, is carrying out the "remediation," or clean-up, of access pits to enable the roll-out of optic-fibre cabling by NBNCo, the government-controlled company installing the network. An estimated 10 to 20 percent of the eight million access pits around the country were constructed using concrete or other materials containing asbestos. Strict handling procedures are meant to govern work at any site where the presence of asbestos is even suspected.

Asbestos was widely used as a construction material until overwhelming evidence emerged that exposure to asbestos fibres of any type posed serious health hazards. Two out of three homes built between World War II and the early 1980s still contain asbestos. Exposure is the primary cause of asbestosis in the lungs and malignant mesothelioma, a rare and deadly form of cancer. The use of all types of asbestos was progressively banned in Australia between 1967 and 2003, but tens of thousands of workers have been exposed through the unsafe handling of the material.

On May 7, Penrith resident Matthew O'Farrell observed unprotected workers working on pits in front of his house, spreading concrete dust onto his property and across the area. Having worked in telecommunications, O'Farrell had concerns that the material might contain asbestos. He contacted WorkCover, an official health and safety authority.

In an interview with the WSWS, O'Farrell explained that his "worst fears" were confirmed several days later—the pits had been constructed with asbestos-

containing material. The work had been carried out in contravention of handling procedures. The workers were wearing no protective equipment; the site had not been sealed to prevent airborne dispersal of particles; and residents had not been warned. The workers were employed by sub-contractors for Service Stream, which has a \$400 million contract with Telstra to carry out "remediation" work in a number of states.

It was not until 18 days after O'Farrell's young family, and the family of his neighbour Troy Lancaster, had been exposed to the material that they were evacuated from their homes to a nearby hotel. Their properties have still not been cleaned.

Since the revelations sparked by O'Farrell's complaints, the Labor government, Telstra, NBNCo, and the trade unions that cover telecommunications workers have sprung into damage control mode. Claims by the Communications Workers Union in Victoria that it "raised concerns" over asbestos with NBNCo in August 2010 simply underscore the fact that nothing was done by the government or the unions to ensure the safety of the remediation work. A statement by Telstra's Chief Operations Officer Brendan Riley that the "safe and proper handling and disposal of asbestos is an absolute and not-negotiable priority" is contradicted by incidents of mishandling being reported around the country.

In Darwin, the Northern Territory capital, a tradesman who wanted to remain anonymous told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on June 7 that, this year alone, "dozens" of pits had been cleaned out in the city by workers without proper safety equipment. He said "asbestos materials were broken up in the streets while pedestrians walked close by." Similar cases have been reported in Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia, and are suspected in Tasmania. In Victoria, the WorkSafe authority is investigating the dumping of bags of asbestos close to a primary school in the regional city of Ballarat.

The contempt for the health of workers and their families flows inexorably from the subordination of society to the profit dictates of the corporations. Significant sections of the corporate elite regard the high-speed Internet services to be provided by the NBN as critical to boosting their international competitiveness and enhancing their business prospects.

A *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial on June 6 articulated their demands when it declared that “the asbestos pits should not be allowed to derail what is a crucial national infrastructure project.” The rush to roll out optic-fibre cabling as quickly as possible, and at the lowest cost, has led to short-cuts and compromises of safety standards.

Serious questions are also raised about the role of the Gillard Labor government. Is it sacrificing the health of families and young children in areas like Penrith by accelerating the NBN roll-out in a bid to avert an electoral disaster? The marginal electorate of Lindsay, which includes Penrith, is one area of Sydney where Labor is desperately using the NBN as a selling point in its election campaign.

SEP campaigners spoke with Penrith residents on Saturday and Sunday about the safety breaches around their homes.

Kathleen O’Farrell, Matthew O’Farrell’s 85-year-old grandmother, explained: “I think this is a shocking state of affairs, to have a little family living in a motel all this time when a business like Telstra could have everything cleaned up within a week. It’s a disgrace. Don’t tell me that they don’t know that asbestos has been in all these pits that they’ve had workers working in all these years. I’ve had a son-in-law die from working as an electrician where asbestos was, and you don’t want to ever see another one die of it.

“My eldest daughter, who has been working with Matthew on the case, is very upset about the whole affair, and naturally you would be. I have spoken to people, such as the community nurses who have come to dress my leg, and they say that they visit a lot of people who have mesothelioma.”

Sharon Horn, who lives near the O’Farrells, said she “wasn’t told a thing about the asbestos removal. The first I knew of it was when I saw a big sign down here saying ‘Telstra cover-up.’ That was weeks after it happened. I live 12 houses up the road. I would have expected a flyer in the mail to notify me of work going on.”

Horn’s brother, who was trained in asbestos removal, said: “I know how dangerous it is. You can have one little

fibre, and it can get in your lungs, and 20 years later you have asbestosis. And you wouldn’t know, unless they were looking for it. A strong wind blowing this way could blow it up the street.”

Asked why the contamination happened, Sharon Horn said it was “laziness” on the part of Telstra. “They do not want to get rid of it. They do not want to spend the money. It comes down to revenue. They wrapped up the houses in black plastic for two days, but the asbestos is still floating round in the air. They haven’t fixed the problem. They have a total disregard for public safety and the workers. There were only two people in biohazard suits. The rest were just dressed normally. They should have had people who deal with bonded asbestos, not just ordinary workers. They don’t because of costs.”

Horn has a Telstra pit in her front yard. “I feel I am unsafe. As soon as they go down there, and open that up, which they already have, I’m exposed. I am frightened now. They were down in that pit a few months ago doing work on the wires. How are those workers? We don’t know. I was out there speaking to them while they were digging. Then they were at a pit further on. These are just some of thousands of pits. This work went on until someone, with some knowledge, was brave enough to speak up. When everything is revenue and profit-based, it can’t be resolved,” she said.

“People need a voice,” Horn concluded. “We can’t speak to the government—they ignore us. They [political leaders] award themselves big pensions when they finish, but for the working class person there’s nothing.”

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