

SEP election meeting in Sydney discusses NBN asbestos hazards

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party held an election meeting on June 23 in Kingswood, a working class suburb near Penrith in Sydney's west, to discuss the exposure of workers and local residents to cancer-causing, asbestos-containing materials during work associated with the roll-out of the Labor government's National Broadband Network (NBN). The meeting was chaired by Zac Hambides, one of the SEP's candidates for the Senate in New South Wales. James Cogan, SEP assistant national secretary and Senate candidate for South Australia, delivered the main report on "the NBN asbestos exposures: the case for socialist planning".

Cogan documented how Penrith resident, Matthew O'Farrell, had revealed unsafe work practices after he raised questions on May 7 over how telecommunication pits were being broken open in front of his house. Because the site was not sealed, the dust spread onto O'Farrell's and neighbouring properties. State health and safety authorities told him within days that the pits contained asbestos. After O'Farrell raised the alarm, at least 19 similar cases were reported around the country.

Cogan briefly reviewed the history of suffering caused by asbestos. The mineral had been used extensively from the mid-19th century, due to its heat and fire resistant properties. The medical link between cancer and asbestos exposure had been established by the 1920s, but "was fiercely resisted by corporate interests." Citing a US court case in 1979, Cogan told the audience: "US shipbuilders, for example, concealed medical studies, with the collaboration of the American government. At least 100,000 workers who worked in US shipyards during World War II ultimately died from mesothelioma."

The speaker explained that despite the evidence, the industrial use of many types of asbestos was not banned in most developed countries until the late 1980s and

early 1990s. Thousands of workers lost their lives as a result. The final bans were not legislated in Australia until 2003. A 1991 US court decision ruled asbestos could be used in cement pipes because a ban would cost companies \$450 to \$800 million, but would only save around 200 lives in a 13-year timeframe. "The ruling", Cogan said, "epitomised the attitude that prevailed in the corporate establishment toward asbestos. The profits that could be made by using the material outweighed the lives of workers."

In the post-war decades in Australia, asbestos was used in telecommunications infrastructure and two out of every three buildings. Corporations such as building material manufacturer James Hardie denied responsibility for workers' deaths from mesothelioma and asbestosis. Despite protracted legal action, well into the 2000s, none of its executives were held accountable. The corporation was required only to establish an inadequate compensation fund.

Each year in Australia, at least 700 people die from mesothelioma—overwhelmingly caused by asbestos exposure—and the number is steadily rising as more workers succumb to the disease.

Cogan said the corporations involved in the NBN, the Labor government and the trade unions were aware that the roll-out would involve work on asbestos-containing infrastructure. He detailed how, despite the known dangers, the NBN roll-out was allocated to a network of contractors and sub-contractors. "Responsibility for health and safety monitoring was dissolved down the line, ultimately to untrained sub-contractors and their untrained workers." Asbestos-handling procedures were ignored, and government regulators and the unions did not scrutinise the work.

"The contracting", Cogan explained, "is the outcome of the policies imposed by the Hawke-Keating Labor

government between 1983 and 1996 and continued by the subsequent Howard and Rudd/Gillard governments. Through the Accords, the trade unions collaborated with the government and the employers to deregulate the economy and the labour market in order to make Australian capitalism ‘internationally competitive’.”

As a result, millions of workers had been reduced to insecure casual, temporary and contract work, under intense pressure to work in unsafe environments and for substandard wages and conditions.

Cogan emphasised that the asbestos exposures were “not the outcome of a few corrupt or incompetent individuals, but the social relations of capitalism that actively promote indifference toward workers’ lives and safety. Profit is the guiding principle of all economic activity.” He cited the 2010 BP oil spill in the US, the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster and the 2013 Bangladesh building collapse as examples of the disasters this produced.

Cogan also reviewed the 1997 independent workers’ inquiry conducted by the SEP into cancer deaths in working class suburbs of Wollongong. It discovered a direct link between cancer rates and proximity to the BHP-owned steel plant and industrial operations which emitted potentially carcinogenic substances. This had been covered up by the federal and state governments, the health authorities and the trade unions so as to not threaten the profitability of the corporations.

Likewise, every effort was now being made by the corporations and the government to placate the working class with assertions that safety would now be enforced during the NBN roll-out.

Cogan concluded: “What is needed is the direct intervention by the working class, in an independent political struggle, against the capitalist profit system. The defence of its most vital interests is inseparable from a struggle to establish a new, higher form of social organisation, a world planned socialist economy, resting on the public ownership and democratic control of the vast financial institutions and transnational conglomerates that currently dominate society and channel the lion’s share of available wealth to a small minority.

“The productive capacity available on a world scale can be harnessed to guarantee the social rights of every human being to a decent standard of living, education, health care, a secure retirement and a safe environment.

It must be brought under the control of the working class through the establishment of workers’ governments based on socialist policies. The existing political set-up cannot be reformed or pressured into backing away from the agenda that is being dictated by globally organised finance and corporations.”

After the report, a worker asked whether Matthew O’Farrell’s home had been cleared of asbestos contamination. Cogan said that while crews had been sent in to seal 21 pits in Penrith area, Telstra had not agreed at that point to carry out remediation on his property.

A worker asked about the residents in other areas who had been potentially exposed during the NBN roll-out. Cogan reported that Telstra had only conceded that incidents had occurred in Penrith and the Victorian city of Ballarat, but Comcare, the national safety authority, has recorded 20 around the country this year, including in Perth, Brisbane and the Queensland town of Mackay. Cogan concluded that the revelations were potentially just the tip of an iceberg.

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