

Australia: Research links mining to high lead levels in Mount Isa

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A research team led by Macquarie University Professor Mark Taylor has identified the high levels of lead around the northwestern Queensland town of Mount Isa as coming “unequivocally” from local mining operations.

For years, successive state governments, the Mount Isa town council and the Xstrata mining company insisted that the dangerous lead levels were the result of the natural environment and geology but this latest study demonstrates that mining activity is directly responsible for the health risks to residents, especially children.

The study, published in the peer-reviewed journal *Environmental Pollution*, has come after eight years of testing in the town. The researchers looked for levels and samples of lead in local waterways, soils, geology and households. They discovered that the lead isotopic signatures or “fingerprints” found in the town matched those from Xstrata’s nearby smelter, demonstrating that the lead did not come from natural sources.

Children, because they are still growing, are especially vulnerable to the harmful effects of lead. Unborn fetuses are at acute risk, as lead is deposited into their bodies from their mothers. Learning difficulties, decreased bone and muscle growth and damage to the nervous system are the result.

In 2008 a study by Queensland Health of 400 children from Mount Isa found that 11 percent had blood levels higher than the international safe level. One child was discovered to have three times the safe limit.

Professor Taylor told the WSWs that his team applied well-known methodology to carry out the critical research. Governments and the mining company have refused to fund, conduct or publish such studies. (See: “Scientist speaks to WSWs about lead cover-up

in Mount Isa”)

Mount Isa, founded as a mining settlement in the 1920s, has mostly produced lead, silver, zinc and copper. A smelter chimney, built in 1978, dominates the town. In 2003, Swiss-based Xstrata, one of the world’s largest mining corporations, purchased Mount Isa Mines for \$A4.93 billion. The town depends heavily on the mining operation, which directly employs about 20 percent of its inhabitants.

The company and successive state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have known the existence of high lead levels in Mount Isa for years. Yet in 1985 the mine was granted pollution exemptions.

In 2007, the Xstrata commissioned a report from Queensland University called *Lead Pathways*, which looked at lead levels in the soil, water and air. The report found evidence of contamination on land and in local waterways, yet declared the local environment was safe. The air component has yet to be released.

After the 2008 child health study, the then state Labor government withdrew the mine’s pollution exemptions, but allowed Xstrata to continue its operations, supposedly on the understanding it would lower its pollution levels to meet environmental safety standards by 2011. A second agreement was drawn up in 2011, giving Xstrata until 2017 to lower its emissions, which it may accomplish with the long-planned closure of the copper smelter in 2016.

In a similar vein, Labor’s Mount Isa mayor Tony McGrady dismissed Professor Taylor’s new study with contempt. “This is about the 12th report he’s done, all of them critical of the city which I live in,” he said, adding, “quite honestly I want to move on now to more productive and positive aspects of life.”

Likewise, the state Liberal National Party

government's Mines Minister Andrew Cripps simply referred the issue to the Mount Isa Lead Health Management committee that was established last year, with representatives from Xstrata. The Australian Workers Union, which covers the Mount Isa workers, continued its long-standing silence on the health and environmental disaster.

The government agencies have perpetrated the company's line that the lead levels in the town are the result of the local geology, thus helping to shield Xstrata from public scrutiny and legal liability. Since 2008, the state and local governments have joined hands with Xstrata to try to shift responsibility for the damage to children's health onto the residents themselves, by creating and funding the "Living with Lead Alliance."

The alliance's basic claim is that living with lead can be safe. Its stated aim is to educate residents as to how hygiene, good eating and cleaning practices can prevent lead poisoning. In reality, previous studies have demonstrated that such education campaigns are ineffective because ordinary people cannot be expected to continuously carry out onerous daily cleaning tasks.

The alliance is currently chaired by the local state parliamentarian Rob Katter, a member of his father's Katter's Australia Party, which campaigns on a right-wing, protectionist platform and supports the mining giants.

Industrial lead poisoning has been documented around the world, including in Australia. In 2005, 60 percent of children under 5 were found to have unsafe blood lead levels near the lead smelter at Port Pirie in South Australia owned by Nyrstar. Nevertheless, the state Labor government agreed to allow the smelter to stay open, as previous South Australian Labor governments had done. (See: "Labor puts profits ahead of children's health at Port Pirie")

In 1997, the New South Wales Labor government of Premier Bob Carr (currently Australia's foreign minister) rammed legislation through state parliament to block legal action by Port Kembla residents to stop the reopening of a copper smelter, despite considerable evidence of lead and other toxic emissions.

That affront became part of the investigation carried out by the Workers Inquiry established by the Socialist Equality Party in Wollongong in 1996-97. It documented the health dangers associated with the

copper smelter and the nearby BHP steel plant. It confirmed the direct link between living in proximity to heavy-metal polluters and higher rates of cancer and other health defects.

The Workers Inquiry exposed state government and union complicity in systematically whitewashing the dangers facing residents and workers, in order to protect the profit interests of BHP and the entire corporate elite. In Mount Isa and elsewhere, the fight for basic health and environmental safety requires an independent political struggle by workers and residents, based on a socialist perspective, against the alliance of mining and smelting companies, governments and unions.



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