

Australia: Mounting anger over coal mine fire health crisis

Daniel Saul**22 March 2014**

Fire fighting authorities in Morwell, 130 kilometres east of Melbourne, yesterday declared that a five-week coal mine fire that began on February 9 is nearly out and that the area is safe.

Evidence continues to mount, however, about the serious health risks incurred by residents, despite Victorian state government denials of any danger. The government's response underscored the utter contempt with which the political establishment regards working class communities like those in Morwell and neighbouring towns.

The government maintained that exposure to the smoke and ash, covering not only Morwell but other towns in the Latrobe Valley, was only "short term" and posed no serious risk to health. Leading air pollution academics rejected these claims. Professor Lidia Morawska, from the International Laboratory for Air Quality and Health, which advises the World Health Organisation, compared the fire to the London smog in 1952, when severe air pollution killed an estimated 12,000 people.

Morawska explained: "The duration of the London smog incident in 1952 was about two weeks and caused so much mortality. There are many examples of health impacts due to much shorter exposure to combustion products than this fire."

An international research study published in the *British Medical Journal* in January showed that only a very small annual increase in exposure to fine particle pollutants found in smoke and haze is associated with a 13 percent increased risk of heart attack.

Morwell and surrounds have experienced extreme levels of air pollution, spiking at one stage to an index rating of 1809, where anything higher than 150 is considered very poor. Approximately 2,000 people presented to an assessment centre in the town with

headaches, nosebleeds and breathing difficulties. A number of people were referred to hospital for further treatment.

While residents suffered for over a month with smoke and ash, the message from the state government remained unchanged. A "precautionary measure" was issued on February 28, when Rosemary Lester, the Victorian Chief Health Officer, advised that the most vulnerable residents who lived closest to the mine, including the old and very young, should "temporarily relocate." The government stressed that this was not an evacuation and that there was no change to its assessment of the absence of a health risk.

Responding to this move, Professor Morawska stated: "The authorities yesterday were trying to calm the public by saying that so far the duration of the exposure would classify it as 'short term,' and therefore is not expected to cause problems. This is not true."

Victorian Liberal Premier Denis Napthine declared that conditions in Morwell were "uncomfortable but not unsafe." The few households advised to leave were able to access weekly welfare payments. Everyone else was only eligible for small one-off grants to aid people to "take a break." No financial assistance was available for anyone outside Morwell, including the thousands of people in nearby towns who were also affected by air pollution.

The government has since allocated just \$2 million in clean-up funding, with affected residents able to borrow vacuum cleaners and high pressure water hoses.

Angry residents staged a demonstration in Morwell at the beginning of the month, with around 1,200 people marching through the town. Chanting "stop the lies" and "People before profit, make GDF Suez pay," the residents directed their anger at the state government and the owners of the coal mine, French-based giant

GDF Suez.

Morwell schoolteacher Erin Gruis told the demonstrators: “The children of Morwell are sick, the adults of Morwell are sick. It has now become normal in Morwell to be suffering from smoke inhalation.” Like many residents, Gruis and her family of six left Morwell and spent the last month sleeping in a single room in a nearby town.

Another resident, Pam Sparks, told the ABC: “The response we’re getting from our government feels like I’m sitting at home watching the American government’s response to Hurricane Katrina.”

Another local told the *Herald Sun*: “We’re just forgotten about in the valley. Let’s just say that if this had happened in Toorak [Melbourne’s wealthiest suburb], it would have been sorted by now.”

The state Labor Party opposition publicly criticised the lack of assistance given to the residents. This is nothing but cynical posturing. Labor bears direct responsibility for the social and economic crisis affecting the area.

When Labor was in office during the 1980s, it initiated a restructuring of the power industry, the major employer in the Latrobe Valley, resulting in the destruction of almost half the industry’s 11,000 jobs by 1992. This paved the way for full privatisation, for the benefit of conglomerates like GDF Suez, and further job losses under the Kennett Liberal government during the 1990s. This was accompanied by the deterioration of working conditions, safety standards and environmental protections.

The Greens called for a state of emergency to be declared and spoke at the Morwell rally, attempting to utilise the disaster to boost their environmental credentials. The Greens, however, represent the interests of a privileged layer of the urban upper middle class and regard working class areas like Morwell with just as much contempt as do the major parties.

GDF Suez received a \$265 million government handout in 2012, courtesy of the Greens-backed carbon tax implemented by the former minority federal Labor government. The subsidy was just one of several giant payouts to corporate polluters under the pro-business carbon tax. GDF Suez is the largest utility company in the world, employing over 200,000 people in nearly 70 countries.

GDF Suez is one of several transnational

corporations that have reaped windfall profits via the privatisation of the electricity industry, while the same process has created an unemployment crisis in towns like Morwell. The company has been accused of responsibility for the coal mine fire disaster, by allegedly dismantling fire safety equipment and implementing other cost-cutting measures. Executives have flatly denied these allegations.

The state government has announced a judicial inquiry, supposedly to examine the origin of the fire, GDF Suez’s role and the authorities’ public health response. This will undoubtedly be a whitewash. Everything possible will be done to cover up the reality that for working class communities such as Morwell, every aspect of public planning and social infrastructure is subordinated to the profit interests of big business and finance capital.



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