

Local residents speak out over toxic recycling plant

Our reporters
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Coolaroo and Dallas residents in Melbourne's northern suburbs spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, denouncing government and environmental protection authorities over their response to the SKM Recycling plant fire last Thursday (see: "Australia: Hundreds evacuated after toxic blaze at Melbourne recycling plant").

Hassan, a pensioner, explained, "I received the message to evacuate but we had no place to go. We're not rich and don't have alternative accommodation. My wife is asthmatic and I had to take her to relatives outside the area. It was lucky I had somewhere to take her. We are low income people, like those at the Grenfell Tower, but our lives should not be worth less than others.

"This area is all working class but all the [recycling company] cares about is profit and loss. They don't care about humanity, it's the company's profits against the lives of the people.

"I think prevention is better than acting after the fire. Nothing was done after the first fire [here] and the same scenario was repeated today. The politicians don't think about the future, all they're concerned about is their power. I've lived here for 30 years but nothing changes, the suffering is still the same.

Hassan referred to previous fires at the plant and said, "If they had been any basic compliance it would never have happened again. The company got fined \$7,000 after the first fire, which is like a 70-cent fine to them.... We don't even know the effect of the fumes on our future [health] but we do know that they think that poor people don't have the right to exist."

Vincent also denounced the \$7,000 fine imposed on the company over the previous fire.

"That's pocket money for them," he said "What about the costs the company has caused? Who pays for

the fire brigade and the cleanup? If I do anything, they're onto me straight away. I'll be fined. Why should we have to put up with this?"

Joanne works at a refugee centre at the Hume Hub in Dallas, south of the fire. "The staff worked [at the refugee centre] on Thursday," she explained. "On Friday we were first told to come in but half an hour later the manager advised that none of the administrative staff should come in. The reason was the hazardous smoke.

"There are a lot of refugees in the area, newly-arrived and asylum-seekers and they don't have a lot of family or work structures to back them up. If you were told to evacuate, how would you know how far away to go? Yesterday I could smell smoke in Reservoir [8 kilometres or 5 miles to the east].

"The factory owners, who are responsible for three or four fires, should be held accountable. They should have been banned or the plant shut down. If a homeowner had a bonfire and caused bad smoke, the council would fine them immediately.

"Hume Hub has a lot of refugee-related organisations. I don't know how many of them were evacuated. We don't even know yet if we're getting paid for the time we had off work," she said.

Mary, who lives in Dallas, said "We couldn't open the windows. I have my mother and mother-in-law living here—one is 78 and the other is 80-years-old. Because of the problems with breathing, you couldn't move them out and you couldn't see, because of the smoke.

"The smoke was so thick, greyish black in colour. There was a little bit of ash, but it was mainly smoke. Nobody called me, to tell us to evacuate or anything. But what are they going to do about it now?"



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