

Australia: Hundreds evacuated after toxic blaze at Melbourne recycling plant

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Toxic smoke and fumes from a major fire at the SKM Recycling factory in the northern Melbourne working-class suburb of Coolaroo late last week led to five people being hospitalised and the evacuation of more than 115 nearby households.

The fire began on Thursday morning among piles of plastic and cardboard. Smoke quickly engulfed the densely populated area with ash reported falling 15 kilometres away from the blaze. Residents were not told to evacuate until several hours after the fire began. This was the third blaze this year at the facility.

Up to 20 fire-fighting vehicles and over 80 fire-fighters, including some from interstate, fought the inferno. One fire brigade representative declared that it was “as big as a football field and as high as a factory.”

Firefighting authorities said that although the fire was brought under control on Saturday, it was “deep-seated,” and clean-up operations would involve splitting apart compacted cardboard. Unless this occurred, the blaze would smoulder indefinitely.

Five people, including one child, were hospitalised on Thursday night with smoke-induced conditions. Another eight people were treated by paramedics for asthma at a local sports and leisure facility which was turned into an evacuation centre. Residents told the media that their children felt unwell, with some vomiting. Others experienced tightness in the chest and throat with their breathing.

While the local Hume Council told residents that it was “safe” to return to their homes at 5 p.m. on Friday, many questions remain unanswered. These include ongoing environmental safety violations by the company and the long-term impact of the toxic fumes on residents.

University of Melbourne Professor Peter Rayner told the *Age* newspaper that particles 0.0025 millimetres in

size (PM 2.5 particles) had the potential to deeply penetrate the lungs and cause “long-term respiratory disease.” He warned that the plastics at the plant were normally incinerated at very high temperatures, “but in a fire like this... you have much less control of what the products of the burns actually are.”

On Friday morning, the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) declared that the air quality was “very poor” due to high levels of PM 2.5 particles. When questioned at a Friday night public meeting about the impact of the dangerous smoke and fumes on local residents, an EPA representative declared, “We don’t know.”

The EPA, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade and the Hume City Council claimed that they were about to conduct an official inspection of the Coollaroo plant on the day of the fire. The inspection was in response to a smaller fire at the site on Tuesday. In an attempt to shift the blame, EPA CEO Neil Finegan told the media last week, “This is a site which is permitted by council. It is not regulated by the EPA.”

The EPA and the local Hume Council also claim that SKM Recycling may be operating within official guidelines and said that residents should wait for the results of official investigations and future legislative changes.

But like the Grenfell Tower fire disaster in London, profit interests are paramount with the health and safety of the working class regarded as expendable (see: “Social inequality and the Grenfell Tower inferno”).

Coolaroo, which is part of the Broadmeadows area, is one the most oppressed working class suburbs in Australia. With the active support of the Labor Party and the unions, job destruction has devastated the auto, car-parts, rubber and other manufacturing industries over the past two decades. Last year, the Ford plant in

Broadmeadows closed resulting in the destruction of 1,000 jobs. Official unemployment is now over 24 percent, and the area has one of the lowest median family incomes in Victoria.

Last Thursday's fire at SKM is the result of the systematic gutting of environmental health and safety regulations, as well as town planning and construction guidelines, by Liberal and Labor governments alike. In line with the profit demands of manufacturers and real estate developers, new homes have been permitted in areas close to industrial sites.

SKM Recycling has repeatedly violated safety regulations over the last two decades.

A work safety inspection in 2005 revealed numerous safety infringements in the day-to-day operation of the plant. This year, the company failed to respond on three occasions to infringement notices from WorkSafe.

One of these involved the storage of an unsecured gas cylinder located close to dangerous goods. The company was eventually taken to court for its failure to comply with numerous improvement notices from WorkSafe.

In 2008, SKM Recycling was fined \$25,000, after it pleaded guilty to two charges for failing to comply with an improvement notice when a worker seriously injured his hand. Two years later in 2010, a fire virtually destroyed the entire plant. The company is currently involved in legal action following a safety incident in 2014 when a worker lost his hand.

In February and March this year, SKM was instructed to remove toxic water, the result of previous fires at its Coolaroo premises. It was fined \$1,500 for its failure to report back to the EPA.

A fire at the plant in February sent smoke drifting over nearby suburbs and took 130 firemen to bring it under control. In June, plastic pellets caught alight requiring 65 firefighters to extinguish the blaze. In both these cases, the local community was warned not to go outdoors to avoid contaminated air.

While SKM Recycling is a small player in the industry, earning about \$150 million each year, the recycling industry is big business paying around \$500 million in annual tax to the Victorian government.

Formed in 1999, SKM Recycling underwent a rapid expansion after winning a tender to collect recyclable material from nine Melbourne councils. The deal reportedly saved local councils \$2.8 million per year

and was hailed by the EPA as a "pretty attractive outcome." The company currently services 30 councils, processing 500 tonnes of paper, glass and plastic each day.

A slump in oil prices, however, has made manufactured plastics cheaper compared to recycled goods and has impacted on profits. This has led to recyclers storing larger quantities of combustible materials on their sites.

Australian Council of Recycling CEO Grant Musgrove told the media on Saturday that the industry was in "survival mode," which "may have a correlation with increased fires."

In other words, recycling plants are becoming virtual time bombs as huge amounts of inflammable materials accumulate and endanger the health and lives of working-class families.



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