

Australia: Another fire at Melbourne recycling plant

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Early this month, a serious fire erupted in bales of commingled recycling material at the SKM Recycling plant in Coolaroo, a working class suburb of north Melbourne. Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) staff and 70 firefighters brought the July 7 blaze under control within three hours, but remained at the site overnight before extinguishing the last of the smouldering material the next morning.

The fire was almost exactly one year after a major blaze at the same plant on July 13 which burned for 11 days, led to five people being hospitalised and forced the evacuation of 115 nearby households. That fire—the plant’s third in 2017—came after the company promised to secure the site following the first incident in February that year.

Fires at SKM’s Coolaroo plant, in February and June 2017, sent smoke drifting over nearby suburbs. It took 130 and 65 firefighters respectively to bring them under control. In both instances, local residents were warned to stay indoors and avoid contaminated air. Toxic water resulting from the fire in February 2017 was removed by SKM on instruction from the EPA. After failing to report back, the company was fined just \$1,500.

While this month’s fire was smaller than last year’s, the issues that produced both incidents remain unresolved, including the ongoing environmental safety violations by the company, stockpiling, and the long-term impact of toxic fumes on residents.

SKM, the media and state government agencies attempted to downplay the significance of this month’s fire. The Victorian Labor government of Daniel Andrews, which faces a state election this year, told the media that the blaze would be investigated by environmental authorities. Emergency Victoria issued a statement insisting that there was no threat to the community, but warning nearby residents to “stay

informed and monitor conditions.”

Emergency Victoria told people to avoid the immediate surrounds of the plant and to turn off heating and cooling systems. “If you are sensitive to smoke or you live with someone who is sensitive to smoke you should close windows and doors,” it added.

It is the third recycling plant fire in Victoria this year: Norstar Steel Recyclers at Laverton North and KTS recycling in Wantirna South also caught fire in February and April respectively.

The Environmental Protection Authority (EPA), which heads a state Labor government task force investigating recycling stockpiles that pose a fire risk, remained on the Coolaroo site until July 8. Since last year’s July fire, SKM Recycling has been the subject of six legally enforceable notices and 28 EPA inspections.

The EPA has identified 800 sites across the state of Victoria that it will be inspecting. Its website blandly declares that the agency’s audit “has identified that the resource recovery sector is generally poorly prepared and ill-equipped when it comes to managing fire risks at their facilities.”

The EPA audit states that “most inspected sites” had fire risk issues “ranging from minor housekeeping matters to major failings in the management of the stockpiled materials.”

In November last year, Victoria’s Inspector-General for Emergency Management published a “Review of SKM Coolaroo Recycling Plant Fire.” The document, however, limited itself to “observations” on the July 2017 blaze and did not make any recommendations specific to the Coolaroo fire.

Incredibly, despite the unknown extent of the health and environmental impact of the fire, the report stated that “[s]ector feedback on the systems, equipment and

intelligence provided for the Coolaroo fire was very positive and highlighted the significant improvements” since an extended fire in 2014 at an open cut brown coal mine. That blaze, which continued for more than a month, endangered the eastern Victorian working-class town of Hazelwood.

SKM Recycling is currently facing a class action legal suit by over 180 residents who are suing the company over damage to their homes and ongoing health problems caused by the toxic fumes from the July 2017 fire at Coolaroo.

Among the most oppressed working class suburbs in Melbourne, Coolaroo—in the Broadmeadows area—is home to significant numbers of immigrant families, many of whom depended on the auto, car-parts, rubber and other manufacturing industries. Over the past two decades the Labor Party and the unions have worked hand in glove with the corporations to eliminate tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs, including through the closure of Ford’s Broadmeadows plant in 2016.

While SKM Recycling has rapidly expanded after winning a tender from nine Melbourne councils, the recycling industry is being hit by a global oversupply of plastic and paper recyclables that is impacting on profits.

State governments, local councils and Australian recycling companies also confront strict “contamination threshold” restrictions recently imposed by China, which purchases a large percentage of Australia’s recyclable waste.

In 2017, Australia exported 29 percent of household kerbside recycling paper and 36 percent of all plastics to China. The average price of scrap mixed plastic dropped from \$A325 per tonne to \$A75 per tonne and cardboard from \$A210 to \$A125 per tonne in 2017.

Focused on maintaining their profit margins, recycling factories, which are stockpiling massive amounts of flammable material, are ticking time bombs. The danger of major toxic fires erupting in working class areas is ever present.

Following this month’s blaze, SKM issued a media statement declaring that it had worked “hand-in-hand with the EPA to ensure a major fire event like that [July 2017 fire] can never occur again.”

This claim did not reassure Coolaroo residents who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*. Some said there seemed to be increased incidents of asthma and

other health issues after last year’s 11-day toxic blaze. Others voiced their concern and anger at the lack of action by companies and governments.

Mohammed, who lives near the plant, has three children. His eldest son has allergy problems. He said: “I don’t know if it’s related to the area or not. The recycling plant should be put in another place.”

Joseph, an older resident, said the toxic fires “put people’s health at risk.” Incensed at repeated incidents at the SKM plant, he said: “No one has done anything about it. It’s a money issue. A heap of rubbish is always a risk of fire.

“You don’t need to be a scholar to recognise that no-one cares about the lower class people. You can kill the people around you as long as you get rich. Whether it’s Labor or Liberal everybody turns a blind eye.”



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