

Australia: Factory fire sends toxic smoke over western Melbourne

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A massive factory warehouse fire last week at Tottenham in Melbourne's western suburbs shrouded much of the surrounding district in black, toxic smoke. Starting early on Thursday morning, the blaze took 140 firefighters with 30 trucks about 17 hours to bring under control. Material continued to smoulder on the site well into the weekend.

Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) acting chief fire officer Greg Leach told the media it was "one of the biggest fires we've seen in Melbourne for a long time."

State authorities warned residents within 500 metres of the factory to shut their doors and windows, and switch off heating and cooling systems, to prevent smoke getting into homes. Fifty schools and childcare centres were closed due to the toxic plume.

The warehouse is owned by Danbol Pty Ltd, whose sole director and shareholder is 74-year-old accountant Christopher Baldwin. On Saturday, the MFB said that the fire was "suspicious" and handed over investigations to Victoria Police arson and explosives officers. The local Maribyrnong council said it had recently inspected the property at the MFB's suggestion but found no cause for concern.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) revealed last Friday that Baldwin's accountancy company, Baldwin Taxation and Advisory, had previously been subject to raids by the Australian Taxation Office (ATO). ATO Deputy Commissioner Jeremy Geale told the state-funded network that the officers had been "examining a group of tax agents suspected of facilitating phoenix activity and promoting the avoidance of tax involving GST, income tax and the failure to remit pay as you go withholding tax payments."

The old 14,000-square metre warehouse had a saw-tooth roof made of asbestos. It was reportedly storing

acetone, a colourless, flammable liquid used as a nail polish remover and a solvent in paint, and acetylene, a highly-volatile gas used in welding.

Asbestos was progressively banned for use in Australian construction between 1967 and 2003. Despite this, many older buildings contain the potentially deadly substance.

The official line of the Victorian state authorities is that the asbestos used in the factory's construction posed a "low risk" in relation to air quality because the material had likely been consumed by the fire. Acting MFB chief Leach told the ABC on Friday that although there was a chance that asbestos fibres had polluted the air, "the heat of the combustion had been such that most of that risk had been ameliorated."

Scientific evidence, however, contradicts such claims. Asbestos Council of Victoria CEO Vicky Hamilton told the media that she tried to contact the MFB and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) following this assessment. "Asbestos doesn't burn up in fire," she told the *New Daily*, "that's why it was considered a good product [in the past]."

University of Western Australia professor of medicine and public health and respiratory physician Bill Musk also told the *New Daily* that asbestos fibres that were "liberated into the atmosphere" during fires and earthquakes were dangerous. "There are different sorts of asbestos, but there's no safe level of asbestos and that's why it's been banned."

Dr Andrea Hinwood, the EPA's chief environmental scientist, told a community meeting of concerned residents at Footscray Town Hall last week that the agency was not detecting concentrations of particulate matter above the standard for public warnings and this justified the "low risk" assessment. She told the residents just to "be sensible." If they smelled smoke,

stay out of it.

EPA official Dr Dave Barry said the agency's tests had detected benzene and toluene compounds in the air but "at levels well below the exposure guidelines" and "not indicative of any significant risk to public health."

The effect of the chemicals released by the fire, however, was immediately noticeable in Melbourne's waterways. An MFB spokesperson told the community meeting that the 8,000 litres per minute of water used to quell the flames was flowing into waterways with unburnt chemicals. Since the fire hundreds of dead fish, eels and birds have been washed up along the nearby banks of Stony Creek and downstream six or more kilometres to the mouth of the Yarra River and into Port Philip Bay.

EPA inland water expert Dr Paul Leahy said Port Phillip Bay beaches up to 15 kilometres from the Yarra River, could be affected. Phenols, poly aromatic hydrocarbons, xylene, benzene and ethylbenzene have polluted popular fishing spots. Leahy admitted that these chemicals were "above recreational water quality guidelines."

Residents who attended the community meeting were clearly frustrated by the lack of basic safety measures by state and local governments. Questions were raised over the auditing and monitoring of industrial facilities. A worker from an environmental group said such warehouses are "a time bomb" and asked why no one was monitoring the activities of these companies.

Sarah Carter, the Labor Party deputy mayor of the Maribyrnong council, told residents not to be "alarmist" and said industry was not to blame.

Last week's fire came less than two months after a major fire erupted at the SKM Recycling plant in Coolaroo, a Melbourne northern suburb. It was the second fire within a year at that factory and the third recycling plant fire in Victoria this year.

The attitude of all the major parties—Liberal, Labor and the Greens alike—is utter contempt for the living conditions of ordinary workers. They defend big business, whose primary concern is to boost profit margins. Companies are stockpiling huge amounts of flammable material and creating the conditions for fires to occur with increasing rapidity and ferocity.

Whatever the exact cause of the Danbol-owned warehouse fire, the latest toxic blaze is a warning that the placing of profit above the needs and lives of

ordinary people will produce more tragedies.



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