

Australian authorities sought to cover-up asbestos removal at Newcastle school

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Documents obtained through a freedom of information request have shed light on the botched efforts by the New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal government to secretly dispose of asbestos at a contaminated public school last year. The debacle is part of a decades-long scandal concerning the use of asbestos in public buildings, involving successive Labor and Liberal governments.

Asbestos is a highly dangerous carcinogenic construction material that was widely used in Australia up until the late 1980s. Despite it being phased out, many buildings are still left with the material in varying degrees of condition. The school in question, Newcastle East Public School, is the oldest continuously running school in Australia. It is situated in a working class regional area.

A week before the end of the school term last year, parents and staff were informed that remediation work was to be undertaken to replace the 1970s-era faux slate roof tiles of a heritage building.

Government documents published by the *Newcastle Herald* last month confirm that the work was deliberately used as a cover to deal with the far greater problem of secretly eliminating friable asbestos, already found in multiple locations throughout the school, over the Christmas period.

Parents and teachers were not informed of the true nature and extent of the work until the commencement of the first term six weeks later, as the project to hastily remove the material was evidently flagging. Positive samples of asbestos were still being discovered during a last-ditch effort at decontamination after the school's opening on January 30.

In the fallout, the New South Wales Department of Education held an extraordinary public meeting at the school on February 3 which left many questions

unanswered. Officials promised that an open letter, which arrived days after it was due, would provide further information. It is now clear that the real aim was to downplay the health risks, cover the government's role and dissipate public anger.

At the meeting, a panel member and occupational hygienist from WSP Australia, a private engineering and planning company, tried to dismiss concerns over the repeated exposure of children to asbestos at the school. He claimed: "We've had an asbestos register in place for all schools since December 2008. That is updated regularly, and as we have indicated, there is no friable asbestos on this site."

The subsequent open letter from the government also stated that the asbestos found in the roof of the heritage building, or "A Block," was, "dust from bonded asbestos. It is not friable, loose fill asbestos."

Such a description serves as a sleight of hand. Non-friable asbestos is less likely to be broken up and ingested into the body, posing a lower health risk. While the material may well have been installed in a bonded state decades ago, with age and weathering it becomes friable. It is for this reason that all forms of asbestos pose a health risk and have been banned in Australia.

Regardless, email exchanges between the government and the asbestos removal company, WSP Australia, indicate that they were well aware of the friable nature of the material in sample testing.

"The sample results have indicated friable asbestos to be present in multiple locations throughout A Block," one email from WSP on December 20 stated. "Whilst the sample results indicate positive results only in a number of rooms, they indicate a broader issue with the integrity of the ceiling lining throughout.

"As such, all rooms throughout A Block are

considered impacted with friable asbestos requiring remediation.”

A later email on January 12, from Artel, a subcontractor involved in the removal, mentions the discovery of “Super 6” corrugated sheeting in the building’s roof space between the tile roof and the ceiling battens. This was unexpected as the school’s asbestos register has no record of the material.

Discontinued in the 1980s, “Super 6” is widely recognised as the most hazardous material to be prioritised for removal. It contains all three major types of asbestos: chrysotile (“white asbestos”), amosite (“brown asbestos”) and crocidolite (“blue asbestos”).

The Artel email stated: “[T]he bulk of [“Super 6” sheeting] is found towards the lower portions of the gables near the eaves. That being said, because it is of a friable nature, the entire roof space needs to be decontaminated.”

With the scope of works becoming more complex, a government email on January 15 expressed frustration: “As per the discussion we are considering introducing another asbestos contractor into the mix to help expedite the works unless the programme provided can demonstrate works occurring concurrently with the aim to finish as the earliest date possible to achieve our objective.”

With days left before the start of school term, another departmental email on January 21 pointed to the dangers: “Although all identified asbestos will have been removed with affected spaces decontaminated, it can’t be guaranteed (by either the principal contractor or hygienist) that any further friable asbestos material won’t be discovered or dislodged from within the roof space while the replacement roof is being installed.

“Our preference remains that the building not be occupied until all works are complete both as a precautionary measure and to avoid community perception issues.”

These issues came to a head on January 27, when teachers were first informed of the contamination and expressed opposition to the reopening of the school. They were also told that numerous teaching resources had been incinerated, including library books, sports and teaching equipment, computers and musical instruments. Even the school’s priceless bicentenary photographs and documents were disposed of, a decision which local archivist Gianni Di Gravio

condemned as a “knee-jerk dump.”

Such drastic moves can only be explained on the basis that the items were caked in incriminating friable material that was too difficult to clean. Parents were advised that the risk of children’s clothing being contaminated was “negligible,” however they were advised that “laundering these items will reduce the potential risk of exposure.”

Further documents also reveal that in quotes for the asbestos removal, contractor Australian Heritage Restorations pointed out that it had highlighted the contamination risk, “many months ago without any acknowledgement.” Why this information was not acted on or made known to parents and staff has still not been explained.

Costs associated with asbestos removal are extensive. Some \$1.4 million were spent in removing the material at Newcastle East Public School up until March 25.

By the Education Department’s own admission, last year 2,185 state schools contained asbestos, half of them containing “damaged asbestos.” Some 109 had confirmed “friable asbestos.”

The ruling elite is presiding over a health time bomb prepared by successive Labor and Liberal governments, which were well aware of the health risks of asbestos as early as the 1960s. Their overriding priority, then, as now, is the defence of corporate profits.

A vast public works program of asbestos remediation throughout the state’s schools and beyond will only take place through the building of a political movement of the working class, including teachers and parents, aimed at the reorganisation of society to meet social need.



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