

Chemical waste plant fire spews toxic fumes into Australian working-class town

Our correspondents
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A fire at the Weston Aluminium chemical waste processing factory on November 14 in the town of Kurri Kurri, New South Wales (NSW), sent thick black toxic plumes into the air. A strong wind carried the fumes, fuelled by multiple chemicals stored at the site, across a wide area, potentially affecting nearly 5,000 residents.

The working-class town is situated in the Hunter Valley, a coal mining region, near the port city of Newcastle.

Despite the potential health danger, from the time fire crews arrived it took five hours for a notice to be sent by text warning residents to stay indoors. Several schools and businesses were forced to close the next day while the fire was still active in several parts of the plant.

Due to the danger posed to firefighters by rapid spread of the blaze they were forced to concentrate on containment. Close to 300 firefighters were called to the scene. The cause of the fire is under investigation.

This dangerous thermal processing plant is allowed to be located within a kilometre of the town. That demonstrates the lack of proper planning and oversight by governments and departments, including the NSW Environmental Protection Authority, and lack of regard for the health of working people, including those employed in the plant.

Weston Aluminium was established in 1996 to process and recycle aluminium by-products. In August 2015 it restructured its operations due to the global downturn in the aluminium industry and the 2012 closure of the nearby Norwegian-owned Norsk Hydro smelter, which once had over 900 workers and contractors on its books.

The 2012 closure devastated Kurri Kurri and nearby Cessnock. The Gillard Labor federal government

mouthed a few words of sympathy for the workers but fully supported aluminium producers that were, like Norsk Hydro, ruthlessly restructuring the industry. The Australian Workers Union ruled out any fight to defend jobs and ensured an orderly closure.

Since 2015, Weston Aluminium has expanded its operations, with NSW Liberal-National Coalition state government approval, despite community opposition and the government acknowledging that the plant poses a potential air emissions risk.

A December 2018 approval allowed the firm to burn environmentally troublesome material such as clinical waste, pathogenic substances, pharmaceutical waste, cytotoxic substances, solvents and paints, pitch sludge residues, oily rags, documents and hard drives, quarantine wastes, and illicit materials, including drugs.

A Department of Planning assessment report had admitted the “handling and incineration of the proposed waste types has the potential to release a range of air pollutants which, if not managed appropriately, could result in air quality and acute (short-term) and chronic (long-term) health impacts.”

When an accident, breakdown or malfunction occurs at the site, the pollutants can include particulate matter, sulphur dioxide, oxides of nitrogen, hydrogen fluoride, acid gases, volatile organic compounds, heavy metals, dioxins and furans.

The plant also has approval to process 45,000 tonnes of aluminium slag, including 8,000 tonnes of other problem waste, and 35,000 tonnes of scrap aluminium each year. Weston Aluminium can keep the plant operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

At a community meeting of over 100 people, held in the Weston Workers Club the day after the fire, residents expressed their opposition to such operations so close to homes. Loud clapping erupted when one

resident said the plant was built in the wrong place.

NSW Fire and Rescue Deputy Commissioner Field Operations Jeremy Fewtrell tried to reassure the townspeople. But asked whether automated firefighting equipment was installed at the plant and what emergency equipment was in place, Fewtrell replied: “I won’t talk specifically about what was and wasn’t there. I don’t have the details.”

When a resident asked if the fire service would publish a list of chemicals in the plant, Fewtrell answered no. He said it was not Fire and Rescue’s area.

Despite the NSW government’s claims in 2018 that it had imposed “stringent conditions” on the Weston Aluminium’s operations, the firefighters entered the plant without a prepared list of chemical fumes the fire would produce.

As elsewhere around the world, the profit-driven government disregard for public safety exhibited in Kurri Kurri is mirrored throughout the Newcastle-Hunter region. Some of the world’s largest corporations are involved. That includes the multinational mining companies whose open-cut coal mines have produced some of Australia’s worst air quality in the mining towns of Singleton and Muswellbrook, particularly endangering the health of the miners who work shifts of up to 13 and a half hours.

Many other examples exist, such as:

* At 9 p.m. on the day before the Kurri Kurri blaze, firefighters and paramedics were rushed to the nearby Kooragang Island ammonia-nitrate facility of Orica, a transnational chemical and explosives manufacturer. A fire outside a carbon dioxide removal vessel forced the plant’s shutdown. It was not clear how workers on the site were affected. The company’s assurance that there was no “off-site” contamination problem will hardly ease concern.

The Orica plant is situated in the Hunter River near Newcastle suburbs, some only 800 metres away. In August 2011, a major chemical leak occurred of 10 kilograms of the carcinogen hexavalent chromium, which the company covered up for over two days. The NSW government was then informed of the event but withheld the information for a further 24 hours. Residents of Stockton, the suburb most affected, later held an angry meeting with Orica but the company showed its contempt for them the next day by releasing 1.2 megalitres of effluent into the river containing

arsenic far in excess of permitted amounts.

The plant stockpiles between 6,000 and 12,000 tonnes of ammonium nitrate, largely for mining industry explosives. This compares with the 2,750 tonnes stored in Lebanon’s Beirut port area which exploded in August 2020, killing over 200 and injuring 5,000. Tony Richards, a former blast operation manager for both Orica and BHP, told the *Newcastle Herald* in 2020 that if an explosion were to occur, 40,000 people would be in the blast zone.

* Before the 2003 closure of the lead and zinc smelters operated by Pasminco, the world’s largest zinc producer, at Cockle Creek, near Newcastle, the plant was, along with the company’s Port Pirie plant, the subject of a class action by residents over serious health issues caused by the company’s failure to take sufficient precautions to stop toxic emissions. When the Cockle Creek plant closed, the soil in the adjacent town of Boolaroo was found to be heavily contaminated with lead, cadmium and other heavy metals. Blood tests on children revealed high levels of lead.

These experiences of workers and residents in the Hunter region are paralleled around the world. Safe manufacturing and mining cannot be conducted under the profit system because every aspect of economic life is subordinated to the insatiable appetite for corporate and private wealth accumulation. Ruthless exploitation of workers, environmental disaster and the risk of mass death are viewed as the costs of doing business.



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