

Australia: 13 tunnel workers diagnosed with life-threatening silicosis in NSW

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Thirteen Sydney tunnelling workers, one of them just 32 years old, have been diagnosed with the deadly respiratory disease silicosis.

All 13 worked on the first stage of the M6 tunnel between Arncliffe and Kogarah, starting in late 2021, according to documents presented to New South Wales (NSW) parliament earlier this month.

The documents show, according to media reports, that SafeWork NSW began an initial investigation in 2023 after NSW Health reported that a worker had been diagnosed with silicosis. In the course of that investigation, a SafeWork inspector noted that CPB, the contractor responsible for the M6 tunnelling project, had “failed to notify the regulator of another 12 workers diagnosed with silicosis.”

The state safety regulator did not make this information public, but began a full investigation into the workers’ silica dust exposure in May last year, following a recommendation by the Chemicals, Explosives and Safety Auditing Directorate (CESA).

CPB’s response to the revelations was to deny culpability, telling the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH), “While these employees received a confirmed diagnosis, this does not mean they contracted it while working for CPB Contractors. Throughout a tunneller’s career, workers are employed across many projects, for multiple industries and companies.”

The submission to SafeWork’s investigation, however, states each of the 13 workers had been working on the M6 site since the commencement of operations toward the end of 2021. The SMH quoted anonymous sources as saying the projects receiving particular attention in the investigation, the M6 Arncliffe extension and Rozelle interchange, were “hideously dusty and unsafe.”

CPB told the SMH that an additional worker had also

been diagnosed with silicosis, but did not reveal which projects they had worked on.

The 14 workers’ diagnoses raise many questions, including whether well-known measures to prevent inhalation of silica dust, such as water suppression, fit-tested respirators, on-tool extraction systems and ventilation have been ignored.

There is no cure for silicosis. The particles inhaled are 100 times smaller than a grain of sand and, like asbestos, lodge themselves irreversibly in the lung tissue. The only remediation for severe cases of silicosis is a lung transplant. In Australia, the current waiting list for such a transplant is up to two years.

Other health issues caused by silica dust inhalation include lung cancer, kidney disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease which causes breathing difficulties. Researchers from Curtin University warned in 2022 that, as a result of exposure to silica dust, 10,000 workers in Australia would be diagnosed with cancer and a further 103,000 with silicosis in the coming period due to unsafe workplace practices.

This latest tranche of documents had previously been marked by SafeWork NSW as “privileged,” hiding them from public view. That an investigation into workers contracting a life-threatening condition has been covered up by the state safety regulator presents all workers with an obvious question: What else are they hiding?

SafeWork NSW has been aware since early 2018 that workers on Sydney tunnelling projects were regularly exposed to dangerously high levels of respirable silica dust, documents released late last year revealed.

Despite this, the regulator has repeatedly blocked requests from the Australian Workers Union (AWU) to release silica dust readings taken between 2020 and 2024.

Moreover, the regulator's practice of advising companies when dust-reading inspections would take place enables companies to "clean up their act" before the inspectors arrived. SafeWork NSW boss Trent Curtin told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) this was necessary because, "given the nature of the projects, it can be difficult to access areas as a surprise visit."

Chris Donovan, national assistant secretary of the AWU, told the SMH, "Giving companies a week's notice before safety inspections isn't regulation—it's collusion."

Donovan continued, "The fact that not a single prosecution has been brought against a tunnelling company, yet we have case after case of silicosis, tells you everything you need to know about the cavalier attitude of tunnelling companies and the lack of regulation of this industry."

Donovan's denunciations of SafeWork NSW and the contractors are an attempt to cover up the role of the union itself in allowing unsafe working conditions to continue.

While Donovan criticises the "cavalier" attitude of the tunnelling companies and lack of regulation as "absolutely disgusting," the leadership of the AWU, with some 75,000 members, has not at any stage mobilised workers against the deadly conditions.

Even after obtaining data on workers' exposure to unsafe silica dust levels from SafeWork through freedom of information requests, the AWU has never called on Sydney tunnelling workers to down tools to demand that their safety concerns be addressed. Instead, serving as an industrial police force, the union has ensured that tunnelling workers have remained on the job, despite the risk, in order to protect the profits of the corporations.

Earlier this month, the NSW Labor government announced an "Expert Taskforce," to "help address silica related health risks for workers in tunnelling projects." This taskforce, "made up of government, medical, industry and union representatives, will provide expert guidance to prevent and manage silica and other dust related disease associated with tunnelling projects in NSW," because "major tunnelling projects present heightened risks for silica-related lung disease."

This only highlights that, after the revelation that 14

workers had been diagnosed with silicosis, the Labor government is in a state of damage control. This "expert taskforce," like the safety regulator and the union, will do nothing to address the fundamental cause of unsafe working conditions—capitalism and the subordination of every interest of workers, including their health and lives, to big-business profits.

None of these bodies represent the health interests of workers. Their only interest is keeping workers on the job regardless of the consequences. Workers on tunnelling projects and throughout the construction and mining industries must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to take workplace safety into their own hands.



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