

Australian study finds more than 10 percent of Queensland tunnelling workers at risk of silicosis

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4 June 2025

More than 10 percent of workers in Queensland (QLD) tunnelling projects are at risk of developing silicosis or lung cancer in their lifetimes, according to a new study published in the April edition of the *Annals of Work Exposures and Health* by Oxford University Press.

The study, called “The future burden of silicosis and lung cancer among tunnel construction workers in Queensland,” was based on data presented to a 2017 state parliamentary inquiry, containing air quality readings taken between 2007 and 2013, during work on the M7 Clem Jones Tunnel, Airport Link and Legacy Way projects.

The authors concluded, “in a cohort of around 2,000 workers who serviced the Queensland tunnel projects, it was estimated that between 20 and 30 cases of lung cancer and between 200 and 300 cases of silicosis would develop over their lifetime as a result of exposure to RCS [respirable crystalline silica].”

Given the secrecy surrounding more recent air quality readings, these figures are likely an underestimation of the unfolding health disaster facing tunnelling workers throughout the state and more broadly.

Silicosis is a lung disease caused by inhaling RCS particles, which are 100 times smaller than a grain of sand. The silica dust becomes embedded in the lung’s air pockets, producing inflammation and scarring, eventually causing breathing difficulties that can lead to death.

According to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation’s 2019 Global Burden of Disease study, almost 13,000 workers died from silicosis that year around the world. Workers in construction and mining were most likely to contract the incurable disease.

The Queensland study’s authors pointed out that, while the link has been made between RCS exposure and tunnelling by the national health and safety regulator, Safe

Work Australia, there was “little information available to researchers” and consequently a “paucity of research.”

This is not an accident, but a deliberate joint effort by major construction companies and government agencies to cover up the dangerous working conditions confronting tunnelling workers.

Co-author Kate Cole, an Occupational Hygienist and PHD Candidate at the University of Sydney, initially submitted a request under the Right to Information Act to the state Office of Industrial Relations (OIR) for air monitoring reports covering January 2015 to July 2023. The 1,628 documents held by the OIR specifically applied to the Cross River Rail (CRR) project.

Cole’s request was denied, after the OIR had discussions with the parties involved in the project—CPB Contractors, BAM International Australia, Ghella, UGL Engineering and the Cross River Rail Delivery Authority—who argued that release of the figures would be “contrary to the public interest.”

Cole appealed that decision to the Office of the Information Commissioner (OIC). The OIC set aside the decision by the OIR, stating in its conclusion that the arguments presented by the companies did not constitute “grounds” to withhold the air quality readings from the public.

The “grounds” presented by the tunnelling companies to the OIC comprised concerns such as loss of reputation, future litigation, ability to attract workers, loss of business and profits, potential industrial action and damage to business relationships.

Cole’s application for the CRR figures, first submitted in December 2023 according to the OIC’s report, has still not been fulfilled and is now before the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal (QCAT).

The cover-up of air quality information in the tunnelling

industry is not unique to Queensland. Just last year, the Australian Workers Union (AWU) submitted to the New South Wales (NSW) Standing Committee on Law and Justice that their request for up-to-date silica dust readings on the state's tunnelling projects had been blocked by SafeWork NSW.

It was revealed in that same Standing Committee that the NSW safety regulator had been colluding with tunnelling companies to prevent the release of air quality readings. These companies used similar arguments about their "reputations" as those employed across the border.

Neither is the pattern of government bodies acting hand-in-glove with massive construction companies a modern aberration.

The dangers of silica dust exposure have been known in Australia for more than a century. An article written by the authors of this new study, published in *The Conversation* last month, pointed to a NSW Technical Committee of Inquiry held in 1924.

The inquiry, called "The Prevalence of Silicosis and Tuberculosis Among Stonemasons, Quarrymen, Sewer Miners and Rockchoppers," found that the longer a worker was exposed to silica dust, the higher the risk of silicosis. The Queensland study authors pointed out that even back then, the findings estimated 10 percent of workers in these industries would contract silicosis.

The summary of the 1924 inquiry contained a warning which has been systematically ignored ever since in the name of increased "productivity."

It stated: "The committee is of the opinion that this extremely valuable work of investigation of the dust hazards by atmospheric tests should be continued, since it is likely to provide the basis for preventive measures which may be adopted at a later date in these two occupations."

Yet the unsafe conditions continue.

Earlier this year, it was revealed that 13 M6 tunnel workers in NSW, the youngest only 32-years-old, had been diagnosed with silicosis. The contractor responsible for the project, CPB, knew about the diagnoses and did not notify SafeWork NSW. It took an investigation by SafeWork NSW after NSW Health notified them of one case, to discover another 12 had contracted the disease.

Last year, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that one-third of air quality readings between 2016 and 2020 in the City and Southwest tunnels in NSW breached workplace safety standards for silica dust. The highest readings taken exceeded the limit by 208 times. Eight percent of those readings were taken in areas where workers were not

protected by any dust mitigation measures.

In 2022, a Curtin University study estimated that over 10,000 workers would develop lung cancer and more than 100,000 would suffer from silicosis due to workplace exposure to silica dust.

Despite its previous posturing over the silicosis threat, the AWU has not so much as issued a statement about the Queensland study, let alone mobilised workers against the continuing risk to their health. Instead, the union bureaucracy serves as an industrial police force, keeping workers on the job, diverting their safety concerns into safe parliamentary channels, and suppressing any action that could impinge upon the corporations' growing profits.

This provides further confirmation that workers' safety on the job cannot be entrusted to the trade unions or the government safety regulators.

Workers in tunnelling, construction and mining need to take matters into their own hands, building rank-and-file committees to lead the fight to defend their health and lives.

Such a struggle will necessarily include demands, backed by a campaign of industrial action throughout the industry, for the implementation of advanced dust suppression techniques and high-quality, fit-tested masking, as well as open access to workplace air quality data.

The ongoing exposure of workers to dangerous silica dust and other industrial safety risks raises broader political questions. Fundamentally, what workers are up against is the capitalist system, under which every concern of workers, including their health and lives, is subordinated to the demands of big business and finance capital for ever greater profits.



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