

Australian study reveals tunnelling workers' concerns over silica dust exposure

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Tunnelling workers' health and lives are at risk from the continued refusal of corporations and government authorities to address the known dangers of respirable crystalline silica dust inhalation, a recent study has found.

The study, led by University of Sydney researcher Kate Cole and published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* last month, examined perceptions of silica dust exposure by workers in the tunnelling industry, 62.5 percent of 290 workers surveyed "indicated barriers that prevented good dust control practices."

As a result, these workers face a major risk of developing serious lung disease. A separate study last year, co-authored by Cole, estimated that, out of 2,000 tunnel workers in Queensland, 20 to 30 would develop lung cancer and between 200 and 300 would suffer from silicosis—an irreversible, progressive and potentially fatal scarring of the lungs from inhaling silica dust.

The latest study found that workers' "awareness of respirable crystalline silica risks was moderate to high yet confidence in dust control implementation was lower."

While some workers reported an improvement in dust suppression over the last decade, the survey revealed "inconsistency" of air-quality measures, as well as "superficial compliance and gaps between knowledge and practice."

The three top barriers to safe air-quality and dust suppression identified by the workers were "lack of management commitment, lack of enforcement of regulation and time or schedule pressure."

The most common self-reported illnesses were "chronic bronchitis, silicosis and rheumatoid arthritis."

Availability of higher-grade respiratory protective equipment (RPE) with powered air purifying functions "remained inconsistent and a concern," despite their use increasing over recent years. Many workers reported significant maintenance problems with the critical

equipment, such as "blocked filters, battery reliability issues and communication difficulties during use."

Workers reported a "culture of fear and hostility," which could lead to being blacklisted or financially punished in the tunnelling industry if they spoke out.

One contract worker wrote: "Production is put above safety, there were multiple times where I couldn't see 5 metres in front of me. When you voice concerns you risk being taken off shift and off the machine you're on and put into an area doing physical labour. You are treated like a number and get locked into these positions by emotional abuse and 'golden handcuffs' as coming off shift is a significant loss in money."

Workers reported air-quality monitors were placed in "clean areas, removed during dusty tasks or used only when machinery was idle, meaning it didn't reflect typical working conditions."

One worker commented: "Air monitors are rarely actually kept on person. And or given to just the closed cab operators. If you want quality results, air quality professionals should buddy up with the said operator or labourer so they can ensure an accurate result. The monitors usually get left behind, left at the tag board or left in the LV [light vehicle]."

Survey participants mentioned that tunnelling companies would often be informed of health and safety inspections ahead of time, giving the company time to 'clean up' for the visit. Others used the term "tick and flick" to describe the regulator's cursory inspection activity, saying inspectors rarely went underground.

One worker commented: "They can't see what really happens when they're not there, sites are informed of the visit and make it look good, numbers are botched, readings not true... it's like they come in tick their boxes and away they go."

Almost half of workers surveyed said the health regulators were not effective in promoting safe work

practices for controlling silica dust.

Workers' fears over receiving a positive diagnosis for silicosis are not just for their health, but for their livelihood. One worker commented: "Some tunnellers are hesitant to conduct [health] monitoring as there is not enough clarification on what degree of silicosis would stop you from continuing to work in the tunnelling industry.

"What steps would your employer/potential employer take to look after you if you are diagnosed? Who pays your wages if suddenly you are unable to continue in your profession that in some cases you've been doing for years and it is all you know?

"A clear guideline should be explained and outlined so workers are fully aware of their rights and the actions that will be taken if they are diagnosed. Will employers just blame previous employers for the exposure???"

One comment which stood out in the study addressed collaboration between tunnelling companies and state governments: "Workers want to control dust, but projects are won by builders forced into compressed programs to deliver a project while the incumbent government is in power. The projects are set up for failure by unrealistic programs, which cascades down to a supervisor forcing a worker to 'just get it done.'"

This comment provides insight into why the authors of this study were unable to gain access to air monitoring reports between 2015 and 2023 held by the Queensland Office of Industrial Relations (OIR) for last year's study. After Cole challenged the decision, it was revealed that the OIR had colluded with tunnelling companies, arriving at the decision not to release the dust figures due to company concerns about reputation and ability to attract workers, citing release of the figures as "not in the public interest."

In fact, the opposite is true. It is urgently in the interests of workers, and therefore the "public," to know if a company profiting from building tunnels is hiding information that shows workers' health is being endangered.

A recent *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) article revealed one worker who worked on the Lane Cove Tunnel, Rozelle Interchange and Western Harbour Tunnel is suing his former employers for medical costs and loss of earnings after he contracted silicosis.

Hamish Studholme, a 20 year veteran of tunnelling, was scathing of the attitude the companies he had worked for had to worker safety, telling the SMH: "Production is always put as number one. Nothing gets in the way of

that. So if you can do it safely, that's great. If you can't, you're going to go ahead and do it anyway."

Bosses, he said "right from the top down, they were very good at preaching safety... But it becomes pretty obvious the most important thing is to keep tunnelling."

As with Cole's research last year into Queensland tunnel workers, neither the Australian Workers Union (AWU) nor the Construction, Forestry and Mining Employees Union (CFMEU) have said a word about this recent study.

The unions have at times campaigned on the issue of silica dust exposure, particularly against the use of engineered stone benchtops, which are now banned. But they have ensured that this took the form of appeals to safety regulators and governments, and was never connected to the broader issue of silica dust exposure throughout tunnelling, mining and other industries, the dangers of which have been known for more than a century.

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.

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

Fundamentally, what workers are up against is the capitalist system, under which every concern of workers, including their safety, is subordinated to the profit demands of big business.



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