

Official report “just a fob off”

Australia: Residents denounce government response to PFAS health disaster

By our correspondents
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WSWS correspondents recently spoke with Terry and Jenny Robinson, who have lived in Williamtown near an Australian air force base for 17 years. The property is within the “red zone” established by the New South Wales Environmental Protection Authority in 2012 after soil and water tests indicated high concentrations of PFAS chemicals (see: “Australian government reports whitewash responsibility for toxic foam crisis”).

Property prices in the area have plummeted and there are serious concerns over the health impacts associated with the chemicals. Jenny is one of a number of residents suffering from cancer.

WSWS: What do you think about the government health report’s dismissal of the dangers of PFAS chemical contamination?

Terry Robinson: I personally think it is just a fob off, especially with everything that has happened in America, where they have proved it is an issue and that there are definitely health effects linked to it. The government can provide drinking water to certain people but it’s not stopping the issue. Our properties are still worthless. No one’s going to buy them.

WSWS: And the decision by state and federal governments not to compensate people living in contaminated areas, or buy out their properties?

Terry Robinson: It’s an absolute disgrace I can understand why they’ve done it, because it’s such a widespread problem. They’re just mitigating their liability and they’ll just ride that to the ground. As other contamination sites began to unfold, that was a bad sign for us, because if it was only one or two sites, they might have done something.

Jenny Robinson: Defence are also doing extensive

work on the Williamtown aerospace extensions, but they still haven’t stopped the contamination coming off the base. They have not tested the soil there because they know it will be contaminated, so it’s full steam ahead for them.

WSWS: Could you comment on the NSW Health report on the cancer cluster?

JR: NSW Health’s study included 1,400 people from as far away as Karuah. They included Williamtown but excluded Fullerton Cove or Salt Ash. Less than 20 percent of the people who were in that study actually live on contaminated land. They diluted the data so they could get the answer they wanted. And they only used evidence from 2005 to 2014. I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2016, so I wasn’t included.

TR: When Jenny was diagnosed we hadn’t really talked to a lot of people in the area, but we gradually noticed a pattern. For example, a gentleman next door died of cancer. We knew someone else on the other side of the road who died of cancer. Jenny basically put together how many people on this corner had cancer-related issues or had died from cancer. On this road here there’s been some pretty rare forms of cancer that overseas have been linked to this chemical.

WSWS: Do you think the \$74 million in federal funding for PFAS is satisfactory?

TR: No, it’s a drop in the water. We’ve received nothing from them.

The only thing we’ve had is a blood test. By the time we finally got our tests done, there was a changeover with the company that was doing them and our blood tests weren’t paid. I’ve never had debt collectors chasing me in my whole life, but I did on this occasion because they never paid the bill and we had summons

taken out on us.

JR: Before they started the blood tests, there was a drop-in centre where you could talk to various departments. I asked a doctor from NSW Health when we were getting our blood tests. He said there is no point in the blood testing because it will only indicate how much chemical is in your blood, and it can't indicate if you will have health issues.

I asked if we would have follow-up blood tests. Again, he said there wasn't much point because it stays in your blood for a number of years, but they would probably look at doing tests again in five years. I took my beanie off and I was totally bald from the chemotherapy. I said: "And I've got to live five years to find out if it's reducing?" He got up and walked away.

TR: They've got no answers when you confront them. This is going to be the biggest environmental issue in Australia.

WSWS: You have signs in your front yard criticising the air base. What's been the response?

TR: I was furious over what happened. We had to do something, so we put up a couple of signs. Some of the neighbours had concerns that it would affect real estate prices, but that was early on, now real estate is finished. I've actually had people who work at the base pull over and ask about the signs. They want to know about this chemical. They're concerned too.

WSWS: Are you involved in a legal class action?

TR: Yes, we felt there was nowhere else to go. I knew Defence was never going to walk up my driveway and say: "We've done the wrong thing, here's a cheque for you and we'll buy you out." That was never going to happen. It's clear now but there were a lot of people holding out for that. There are a lot of people around here who need to get out. They're starting to get tired. We're all tired.

WSWS: What's your experience with government ministers?

JR: We've had a couple of ministers come up here. We knew that Senator [James] McGrath was coming. He is supposed to be in charge of the government's PFAS taskforce but he was only going to speak to a select number of residents and we weren't allowed to let media know.

The media did find out and Defence Minister Marise Payne actually showed up. She didn't have much to

say but told the media: "We've all got this in our blood. It's even in my blood."

NSW state Premier Gladys Berejiklian came here recently and wanted to talk to residents. We were invited and so we went. The rest of the people there were just business people and property developers. One of them complained that he had \$10 million tied up in property here that he couldn't do anything with.

We came away from the event feeling like we're nothing. We're just residents with a property and have got more to lose than the developer. We've got everything we own tied up here.

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