

# Industry Rules.

By Olive Rodwell

I have had a long association with BHP. I have breathed in its smoke, grit and fallout all of my life. I grew up in Islington, a suburb of Newcastle adjacent to BHP.

As children, my brother and I used to go down to Maitland Road at the afternoon change of shift to watch the men on pushbikes riding home from work. Thousands upon thousands rode past – three or four abreast. It was a daily ritual that lasted about half an hour. A sight not to be forgotten – a sight not to be seen today. Over 20 000 men worked at BHP in Newcastle in those days.

The dirt and dust from the steelworks added to the smoke and grit from the old steam trains that encircled our suburb, on their way to the works or to the harbour. I can remember the problems my mother had keeping the house clean and trying to keep her very busy children from looking like street urchins.

I left dirty Newcastle and finally found my way to settle and live in filthy Port Kembla. Why? Love is blind. My husband was a Port Kembla boy and like most Port Kembla people, loved living in the thriving town that had so much natural beauty and several excellent surfing beaches. Times changed however as industries expanded and encroached on the township.

The distance between Port Kembla and Wollongong, when travelled along the Old Port Road and across the bridge at the Tom Thumb Lagoon, was only 4 miles. Often, after the pictures or a dance, people walked home to Port if they missed the last bus. But when the lagoon was dredged to develop the harbour, we had to travel via Springhill Road. That was a longer journey and took us right past the steelworks. We had to wind up the car windows to keep out the smell of rotten egg gas and sometimes the smoke was so thick you felt you could slice it.

Where we lived in Port Kembla the BHP fallout did not overly bother us because fumes from the copper smelter were progressively polluting the air

as ER&S strove to increase production. Our homes were often covered with kish, a shiny black fallout, from BHP, but our most pressing problems came from the copper smelter.

Working class people in the 50s were tolerant of industrial pollution. Everybody from industrialists to governments allowed horrendous pollution. They accepted that in order to have jobs, pollution would be created. So industry and governments did nothing and did nothing to correct the situation. The damage to human health was not known or considered by the general population. Finally after years of agitation from a few alert residents the state government was pressured to pass the Clean Air Act in 1961. Although Port Kembla residents were the catalysts for the Clean Air Act, local industries were never made to comply with it. They were and still are allowed exemptions and exceedences. **Industry Rules.**

The community movement continued and in 1986 the residents formed the Port Kembla Pollution Meeting. The meetings brought together the community, the government authorities and industries to discuss pollution matters. Progress has been slow. The community has been trying to drag the government and industries into clean non-polluting production.

Historically industries only become clean when they are forced. Industries have one prime aim – to make money for the shareholders. It is the responsibility of governments to set the guidelines. But what government will come down heavy on an industry that donates to its election funds? **Industry Rules.**

In 1996 we first heard about dioxins coming from the sinter plant at BHP. Residents asked about dioxins at the next Port Kembla Pollution Meeting. The BHP management told us that it was only a small amount of dioxin – not even enough to fill a salt shaker. That statement was recorded in the minutes of the meeting. Greenpeace released a report showing test results for dioxins at BHP in Newcastle and Port Kembla in 1993 produced 90% of NSW's dioxin load. The small amount that was not even a salt shaker full was 29 grams – the highest known emission of dioxin from any chimney in the whole

of Australia. According to Greenpeace, this is six times the allowable dose for the entire population of Australia.

As news filtered through about the toxicity of dioxins and the Leukaemia Cluster tragedy unfolded residents agitated more. The Leukaemia Cluster Investigation came to the conclusion that no cause could be found for the illnesses and deaths of so many of our young people. Some in the community claimed there had been a cover-up. Certainly dioxins and radiation were not taken into account in the study and synergistic effects were too difficult to consider.

The EPA negotiated a Pollution Reduction Programme with BHP to reduce the dioxin emissions by the year 2000. But when BHP had a downturn in profit, it sought and was granted a two year extension to the pollution reduction programme. BHP had spent billions of dollars acquiring overseas assets such as Magma Copper that were financial disasters, yet it could not find the money to fix the Port Kembla sinter plant. It still does not have to reduce dioxins at the plant until December 2002. **Industry Rules**

The National Pollutant Inventory (NPI) proposal encouraged residents to think the federal government was finally getting tough with the big polluters. However, we soon discovered dioxins and copper smelters are not included in stage one of the NPI. Dioxins, one of the most toxic substances known, are still not audited in the NPI. **Industry Rules.**

Residents decided to push BHP and the governments to take action against the dioxin emissions. With the help of the South Coast Labor Council they formed the Dioxin Action Campaign (DAC). The group bombarded governments with information and with the help of the media, tried to educate the community. DAC asked the Federal Government to carry out a baseline biological monitoring of dioxin levels in the community. So far nothing has been done to that effect. We handed out hundreds of dioxin brochures at BHP's link-up in Darling Harbour with the AGM in Melbourne. We out manoeuvred the security guards who were not pleased by our activities. However when Greenpeace arrived later the behaviour of the security guards became less aggressive towards us.

We failed in our attempt to attend the meeting to ask shareholders to pressure the BHP Board of Directors to address the dioxin emissions at Port Kembla. We were not allowed in, even though we had proxy forms. I am now an owner of BHP shares and it is my intention to speak at the next BHP meeting, wherever it is held.

After public pressure BHP spent \$500,000 on a Health Risk Assessment for the sinter plant. I believe that study was flawed. It did not include historical contamination, it did not include sulphur dioxide fumes, it did not include particulate matter and it did not use the correct percentage for the dioxin pathway through food. The urea trials that were proceeding at the time were also not included. How accurate could such a report be? The conclusions in the report said: "The cumulative cancer risk to the maximum exposed off-site individual is 3 in 1 million. From this assessment it is concluded that the potential risks to public health from the Sinter Plant Facility sources are minimal." Next day BHP rushed to the media to disclose its "clean report card" but what it did not say was the result was 3 times the EPA's acceptable risk level of 1 in 1 million. **Industry Rules**

BHP is presently funding a Radionuclide



Investigation. In August 2000 BHP Steel at Port Kembla announced it had found small amounts of radionuclide emissions from the sinter plant. Illawarra Residents Against Toxic Environments (IRATE) immediately sent a number of questions to the EPA about the potential for radiation to be in the waste products from BHP and other industries. We still have no definitive answer to the questions. The expert from Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency (ARPANSA) could not be specific about radiation levels in industrial wastes. The community has been involved with drafting the terms of reference of this study, but with so many basic questions unanswered we have been working from a low knowledge base. My hope is that the study will find out the truth and that the community members are not being exploited.

Meantime the residents near BHP are suffering from dust fallout and very high levels of dioxin emissions that have exceeded the European standards up to 70 times. Australia still has no dioxin standard for emissions. Australia is years behind other western industrialised countries. **Industry rules.**

The persistent organic pollutants (POPs) Treaty (that includes dioxins) were opened to governments for adoption and signature in May 2001 and will enter into force once ratified by fifty countries. So far the Howard Government has not made a commitment to sign the treaty. Greenpeace is lobbying Labor to sign if it comes into power after the coming federal election. In Australia there is very little data on the levels of dioxins in the environment, in food or the population.

In 1997 Carr's government passed the Pollution Control Amendment (Load Based Licensing) Bill. It is a scheme that will charge a fee based on the quantity and type of pollutants discharged. Sounds great, but compared to international fees for sulphur dioxide the proposed NSW fee is pathetic - \$6 per tonne. California is up to \$576 per tonne, Japan is up to \$2,322 per tonne and Sweden (a country committed to reducing pollution) is \$5,778 per tonne. NSW is considering \$6 per tonne. That is an open invitation to overseas companies to come to NSW, Australia to pollute. **Industry rules**

The State Labor Government and the Federal Liberal Government talk about sustainable development but that is only lip service. They continue to kowtow to polluting multinational companies.

The residents living near the heavy industries face innumerable problems from emissions of dioxins, sulphur dioxide and Nox gases and toxic substances such as benzene, lead, arsenic, cadmium, chromium and mercury. There have been years of neglect about the dangers from asbestos and our 'head in the sand' attitude continues regarding 70 years of contamination of the air we breathe and the homes we live in.

Whilst the aim of BHP is to earn profits for its shareholders it should also give due attention to its workforce and the neighbouring communities. It is the responsibility of the elected governments to set and enforce emission standards that will protect their constituents. The three levels of government have failed in their duty of care to protect the health and well being of the residents and their families who live near the heavy industries.

**Industry should not rule.  
The people should rule through governments that are committed to serve the people and not the multinational companies.**

## *some VERY SIMPLE steps to tread lightly on this earth*

By Sabine Holt

We make decisions every day of our lives. Make them ethical.

Lets start in the supermarket. It comes down to being an informed consumer, then there's the three R's - reduce, re-use, recycle.

Don't use plastic bags. Buy the recycled toilet paper (no need to re-use or recycle this one), recycled lecture pads (ask the SRC about free scrap pads), etc. Shampoos and conditioners that aren't tested on animals are cheap and easily found at local supermarkets. Using a smaller amount per wash is just as effective, and remember you can recycle the packaging afterward. Select a biodegradable dishwashing detergent or use pure soap (you can add some baking soda), again reducing the amount that you use and recycling the packaging. Eucalyptus oil and/or baking soda are excellent alternatives for cleaning floors and kitchen and bathroom surfaces. Add eucalyptus oil and/or baking soda to pure soap to wash clothes. White vinegar is a good stain remover (for beer, sweat...), as well as an anti-mould agent, mild disinfectant, bleach and deodorant. Eucalyptus oil is great rubbed on tough greasy stains and borax is a less harmful bleach. There's a segment on natural living in the local Advertiser newspaper (next to the Waif of the Week). Most beauty and household products are unnecessarily tested on animals. Check out People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)'s website: [www.peta-online.org](http://www.peta-online.org) for a list of the companies that don't test on animals.

Peter Singer poses a thought-provoking question in *How are we to live?* (1995):

"Some consumer products damage the ozone layer, contribute to the greenhouse effect, destroy rainforests, or pollute our rivers and lakes. Others are tested by being put, in concentrated form, into the eyes of conscious rabbits, held immobilized in rows of restraining devices like medieval stocks. There are alternatives to products that are environmentally damaging or are tested in such cruel ways. To find the alternatives can, however, be time-consuming and a nuisance. Will you take the trouble to find them?"

We all need to consume - this purchasing power can be used in a positive way - think about the ramifications of

everything you buy. Support local small businesses that you know are treating their workers and the environment in a responsible manner. Ethical companies apparently do exist, you could start your search with [www.ethicalconsumer.org](http://www.ethicalconsumer.org). Try to avoid the multinationals that use their huge resources to exploit workers and destroy the environment.

When it comes to food its very simple. Don't eat animals! Where you draw the line is up to you. Most vegetarians don't eat eggs from battery hens. Choose free-range eggs or use an egg replacer that is free from all animal products (it's sold in supermarkets). Rennet (found in the stomachs of calves) is used in the cheese-making process. Read labels and buy only those that explicitly state they don't use rennet. Soy cheese is available. Cows produce milk for their young, and need to be constantly pregnant and lactating, and their male calves are often sent to slaughter. Instead of their usual lifespan of 25 years, cows farmed in factory conditions live only three to five years. Buy soy milk if you don't want to support this cruelty (or get your own cow or goat).

A vegan lifestyle is the next step. People can live very happily without animal products. Check out [www.vegsource.com](http://www.vegsource.com). Another sensible choice is to buy organic, and avoid G.M. (genetically modified) foods. This one is made easier with our very own Happy Bellies store on campus. A local group who deliver to your door are Doorstep Organics [www.doorstep.com.au](http://www.doorstep.com.au). And if you want to get your hands dirty, join the permaculture society at Wollongong Uni.

There are so many other things you can do to tread lightly on this earth. Turn off the lights you don't need. Ride a bike. Vote. Donate to responsible charities. Get educated - easy with the internet. Participate on the net - there are many click-to-donate sites where it costs you nothing to save lives and forests (my own site <http://world.care2.com/sholt/index.html> has links to a bunch of them). There are campaigns where you can sign petitions on the net (eg. <http://passport.panda.org>) or email representatives and be heard (eg. the Australian Student Environment Network [www.asen.org.au/index.html](http://www.asen.org.au/index.html)).

Go to actions. Create your own. Live!

**When we finally turn around and see,  
There will be no ocean large enough to hold  
the tears."**

**Richard i. Cox**