Welcome to Issue 2 of Workers Solidarity Bulletin. Forty-nine years ago yesterday, the West Gate Bridge collapsed killing thirty-five workers and injuring eighteen others. The primary contractor, John Holland Construction, told workers the West Gate Bridge was safe and would not collapse. Today, John Holland-CBP is responsible for the Westgate Tunnel project and safety concerns are everywhere. In this issue we outline the dangers that unions are fighting to address at John Holland-CBP’s Toxic Tunnel.

Workers Solidarity’s objective is to rebuild a fighting union movement. Thank you to everyone who provided feedback on Issue 1 of Workers Solidarity Bulletin, if you have any comments, suggestions, or feedback about Issue 2, please email:

we.are.workers.solidarity@gmail.com

CFMEU - GBar

Asbestos removal workers at GBar came to an agreement with their employer after 10 weeks on strike. Workers were striking for a new EBA, improved safety conditions, as well as demanding correct allowances and leave loading. The CFMEU NSW Branch announced that workers have signed a new EBA with improved pay and conditions.

RTBU - Metro Trains and Yarra Trams

The RTBU continues negotiations with both Metro Trains and Yarra Trams.

Tram drivers were poised for another 4 hour stoppage on Thursday 9 October, however citing concerns over the “unpredictable nature” of Extinction Rebellion protests scheduled for the same day, and “as a sign of good faith” the industrial action was cancelled at short notice. The union has warned that if Yarra Trams doesn’t budge in negotiation, the strike will go ahead at a later date.

At the time of writing, the RTBU and Metro Trains were set to meet in the Federal Court on October 14 in a bid to restore their proposed industrial action. The RTBU has also called for off-duty members, union members and supporters to participate in a rally on Thursday 17th October at 11:30am urging Melbournians to meet under the clocks at Flinders Street Station and join workers “in standing up against another multi-national corporation hell-bent on attacking workers conditions!”

CFMEU - Boggabri Miners

In early September, 100 Miners walked off the job at the Boggabri coal mine in NSW during EBA negotiations. It has been reported that the agreement favours FIFO workers rather than locals. Workers are also calling for better pay, claiming workers at different Idemitsu mines in the state earn up to $40,000 more per annum. After a negotiation meeting was
The West Gate Tunnel project is a toxic nightmare for workers. The company responsible, John Holland-CPB, is refusing to look at the evidence.

Work on the West Gate Tunnel is taking place in some of Melbourne’s most industrialised areas. While there are many contaminants to be found in the area’s soils, anyone who knows the history of the area would know that the soil contains asbestos.

But every time workers dig up asbestos John Holland-CPB describes it as an “unexpected find”. In project documents obtained by the CFMMEU, these “unexpected finds” keep happening again and again.

In addition to asbestos, documents obtained by the CFMMEU reveal the area’s soil is riddled with PFAS hotspots. But John Holland-CPB has shown little interest in finding out the true extent of the problem.

So what are PFAS? PFAS are a group of manufactured chemicals that have been used since the 1950s in a range of common household products including in the manufacture of non-stick cookware; fabric, furniture and carpet stain protection products; food packaging; and in some types of fire-fighting foam.

PFAS has been blamed for birth defects and cancer clusters. And once it has been released, it’s nearly impossible to get rid of.

The PFAS firefighting foam is a “forever chemical” with a toxic reputation. It’s been at the centre of health scares around the world – with many of them happening here in Australia. In NSW’s Hunter Valley, a cancer cluster involving dozens of residents along Cabbage Tree Road has been linked to PFAS used at the nearby RAAF base. Outside Ballarat, the CFA’s
Fiskville training centre is so badly infested with PFAS that it is now mothballed, and was the subject of a parliamentary inquiry.

In relation to the West Gate Tunnel Project, the project’s own hygienists have told John Holland-CPB that inadequate testing of the area’s soil has been carried out. The CFMMEU has requested John Holland-CPB carry out more accurate and up-to-date testing.

OHS is a basic entry point to union organising for all workers, because it is an area where the interests of the employers and workers are exposed as being inherently in conflict. OHS is exactly the same issue in all countries and the same things kill us no matter where we are. Asbestos and toxic chemicals are dangerous everywhere. Heat, cold and overwork are unsafe everywhere. Companies worldwide systematically turn a blind eye to workers’ health and safety because it takes away from their profit bottom line.

John Holland-CPB has done this before, and will do it again if we, as workers, don’t organise to stop them. In a timely reminder, John Holland-CPB was a contractor on the infamous Westgate Bridge project, the collapse of which cost the lives of 35 workers and injured a further 18. The anniversary of this workplace massacre was yesterday, 15 October. This massacre politicised workers such that many OHS reforms that we enjoy to this day, came out of that tragedy.

We can ban asbestos and unsafe work practices where our unions are strong. Asbestos was banned in Australia, through union action. Companies and governments knew it was a killer product, but they did not want to give up profits. Asbestos mining has been banned in Australia since 1983. Australia introduced a ban on companies manufacturing asbestos products in 2003.

We can win this fight on the Westgate Tunnel project, just as we won the ban on asbestos in 1983 and 2003. To do that, we must support genuine unions which are prepared to take action and ban asbestos and other toxic chemicals. We need to send our message of solidarity to our brothers and sisters when they take action, often against very repressive companies and governments. We need to support industrial bans on asbestos and support unions that take action to enforce these bans — and right now, we must support the CFMMEU, ETU, AMWU and Plumbers Union in their fight against John-Holland-CPB.

More information:
https://toxic-tunnel.com/

Lisa Zanatta / CFMEU - Construction and General Division Victoria, Organiser and Women’s Officer

How long have you been a union member? 30 years

Why did you join the union? I was bought up with the notion that Unions were like your family. We stand together, we belong to the collective and we support and contribute to make our unity strong. That’s what my family is all about and that’s what my union is about too.

I joined my union, the then BWIU 30 years ago as an apprentice Carpenter and Joiner. At times during this period I have even been a dual carrying union member based on principle and place on employment. As a young woman my parents always taught me never ride on the coattails of others – ‘to always weigh in’. Never be a SCAB!

What’s your best memory/story about being in the union movement? It’s hard to pinpoint my best memory in the union movement as I have many over this time. However, there are two experiences that have had a profound and lasting effect:

As a young activist in the early 1990’s, I was part of a small group of Construction Women who campaigned to eradicate the Victorian Building and Construction Industry of pornography material. The campaign was multifaceted and it allowed rank and file Women to discuss the critical issues Women construction workers faced in the industry, such as of sexual harassment and bullying (just to name a few)! We followed union rules and procedures and worked hard for the union to adopt resolutions on these significant workplace issues. The union leadership was progressive and agreed to led an industry wide campaign to educate their members and rid construction sites of illegal and inappropriate material. Whilst the union faced some resistance at the time, I am proud that decades later pornography is very rarely present or visible.
Twenty-one years on, the MUA/Patrick Waterfront dispute is still galvanised in my memory. It was an experience I will never forget - the importance of organising and solidarity. I spent many days and nights alongside hundreds and hundreds of other workers and community supporters. I listened and learnt how conservative governments, corporate greed and oppressive IR laws can work to destroy the working class. And I listened and learnt how politics, union and human rights, job security and power. How the power of the people can overcome. That’s what I experienced on that picket line, the unmovable and unwavering strength when people stand shoulder to shoulder in unified solidarity. Oh how true is the cliché ‘United We Stand Divided We Beg’.

What’s the most important issue facing the union movement today? The Ensuring Integrity Bill is in view the most dangerous issue facing our movement right now. This Bill threatens the freedom and democratic right for Unions to organise, to bargain, to protect. We must fight against it at all cost, we must fight for workers.

Why should people join their union? If you believe in equality. If you believe in social justice. If you believe in health and safety rights. If you believe fair wages and conditions. Then the answer is simple.

I struggle to understand the consciousness of a non-union worker who reaps the benefits of union won wages and conditions.

The Diggers Oath defines best what it is to be UNION ... ‘to stand truly by one another and to fight to defend our rights and liberties’.