

National Affairs

by James Ridgeway

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Union Carbide was environmental enemy number one in the U.S. Its plant at Alloy, West Virginia was called the "smokiest factory in the world." In the town, an outdoor statue of St. Anthony had to be sheathed in plastic to keep it from turning black. The company stonewalled efforts to clean up plants, and as *Fortune* put it, Union Carbide was generally viewed as "a reactionary ogre obsessed with profits."

Since then — until Bhopal — the company's slick public relations campaign had swept the unseemly aspects of its operations under the rug. Still, they keep crawling out. On November 13, for example, the West Virginia air pollution control commission fined the company \$50,000 for burning hazardous waste in an open trash dump. In its defense Carbide said it didn't keep track of the hazardous wastes it was generating. Even in these days of deregulation that's a pretty incredible admission. Federal and state laws governing hazardous wastes require that producers of the toxins trace them from cradle to grave.

In his recent testimony before a House subcommittee, Perry Bryant of West Virginia Citizens Action Group pointed out that emphasis on methyl isocyanate (MIC) obscures the fact that the Union Carbide plant at Institute, West Virginia discharges into the air two other deadly gases, chlorine and phosgene. Bryant presented the subcommittee with a chart listing the names of chemicals, some of them known carcinogens, discharged into wastewater facilities by Union Carbide from its plants at Institute and South Charleston.

As for the company's safety record in the U.S., and whether Bhopal can happen in West Virginia, Bryant says: "This is not a case of 'Can it happen here?' It happens here every day. We live in a long, narrow valley that traps and concentrates these pollutants without the dispersal possibilities found elsewhere. According to West Virginia Department of Health records, between 1968 and 1972 Kanawha County residents experienced an increase in respiratory cancers 25 percent above the national average. Between 1973 and 1977 we experienced an increase 21 percent above the national average. A 1982 Health Department report indicates that the residents within the section of North Charleston located directly across the river from Carbide's South Charleston plant contracted cancer at twice the national rate."

In a 1981 report on the chemical industry, the Council on Economic Priorities chastely noted the following: Union Carbide employs over 1,700 people at its South Charleston plant. Over 400 chemicals and plastics are produced in the plant, including acrylonitrile and vinyl chloride. Throughout the world there have been only 63 cases of angiosarcoma, a liver cancer associated with the production of vinyl chloride. Six of these cases were employees of Union Carbide's South Charleston plant in West Virginia.

"In that same South Charleston facility," the report continued, "a 1976 study by the company found that its vinyl chloride workers had four times the expected incidence of leukemia and twice the expected incidence of brain cancer." Yet

Union Carbide's Five Decades of Death



*Since the Depression,
Workers Have Been Dying To
Shore Up Union Carbide's
Profit Margin.*

three years after the completion of the study, one of Carbide's medical directors was quoted in the *Charleston Gazette* as saying that "to my knowledge, there is no evidence on the face of this earth to link incidences of brain tumors to vinyl chloride . . ."

In 1930, Union Carbide played the major role in what economic historians have come to view as the single worst industrial disaster in American history. This occurred over the course of two years during the construction of the Hawk's Nest Tunnel at Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, not far from Charleston. At the time, the New Kanawha Power Co., a subsidiary of Union Carbide (then called Union Carbide & Carbon), employed a contracting firm called Rinehart & Dennis Co. to drill a four-mile tunnel so as to divert water from the New River to a hydroelectric plant at Gauley Junction.

About 2,000 men were employed over two years in driving the tunnel through rock that contained high concentrations of silica. In building the tunnel, 476 men died outright from silicosis, and the re-

mainder were afflicted in one way or another for the rest of their lives. Although the engineers knew very well that they were asking men to drill through a deadly mountain of glass, they never told their crews about the dangers. They refused to buy the masks that could have cut down the danger from the silica. To avoid any possible protest, they disposed of the dead quickly, carting them miles away for mass burial.

The details of Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster became known in 1934, when the survivors filed suits, which later were settled for pittance. In 1936, the House Labor Committee conducted an investigation which shed some light on the disaster, but save for a now long-forgotten novel and the frayed pages of the hearing transcripts, the Hawk's Nest Tunnel has passed from memory.

At the hearings, Philippa Allen, a New York social worker from the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood House, was the lead witness:

" . . . The dust was so thick in the tunnel that the atmosphere resembled a patch of dense fog," she said. "Workmen in the

tunnel could see only 10 to 15 feet ahead of them at times . . . Dust got in the men's hair, on their faces, in their eyebrows; their clothing was thick with it. One worker told how dust settled on top of the drinking water.

"The majority of the men working on the tunnel, who died when the work was first started, were colored men. Mrs. Charles Jones, who lives at Gauley River, told us that 'they buried them like they were burying hogs, putting two or three of them in a hole. They were treated worse than if they were mules. The foreman would cuss at them bad and run them ragged. He would run them right back into the powder smoke in the tunnel after a shot, instead of letting them wait 30 minutes like the white men do.'

"This greedy company of contractors not only robbed its workers by a ridiculously low-wage scale, but purposefully doomed them to die when they neglected to furnish men respirators which would have kept them from inhaling the deadly silica dust in the tunnel headings. Kies, the purchasing agent for Rinehart & Dennis, was overheard to say to a respirator salesman, 'I wouldn't give \$2.50 for all the niggers on the job.'

"They thought they would finish the job and be out of the state before the men began to die. Silicosis usually takes from 10 to 20 years to develop in one's lungs. Kies spoke again for the company when he said to Hawkins, the assistant superintendent, 'I knew they was going to kill these niggers within five years, but I didn't know they was going to kill them so quick.'

"Almost as soon as work was begun in the tunnel, the colored men began to die like flies. As soon as a man died, they would bury him. One colored boy died at four o'clock in the afternoon and he was buried at five o'clock without being washed. Why? Because the company did not wish an autopsy made. . . ."

Mrs. Charles Jones lost three sons to silicosis that year. The company awarded her \$800 apiece in compensation.

George Robinson came to West Virginia from Tennessee and worked on the tunnel as a driller for four months in 1931. He, too, developed silicosis: "If a colored man was sick and really couldn't go to work in the morning, he had to hide out before the shack rouser came around. That fellow had two pistols and a black-jack to force the men to go to work. If we didn't go to work, he would club us and make us go, and if we resisted him he would shoot us, so there really wasn't anything to do. The only thing a sick man could do to avoid work was to hide out before this man showed up. . . ."

"When it got so a worker couldn't make it at all, when he got sick and simply couldn't go longer, the sheriff would come around and run him off the place. . . . Many of the men died in the tunnel camps; they died in hospitals, under rocks, and every place else. I helped to bury about 35 men, I would say."

At the Hawk's Nest Tunnel, in the midst of the Depression, the contractors got the price of labor down to 25 cents an hour. Labor is no longer quite that cheap in West Virginia, but in Asia 50 years later, it's even cheaper. In Indonesia, where Union Carbide now maintains a battery plant, laborers work for one dollar a day. The real story behind the Bhopal catastrophe involves the shoddy standards employed by firms such as Union Carbide that export technology to the Third World in an effort to increase their profits through reduced production costs and cheap labor.

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You'd never know that to listen to Union Carbide's chairman, Warren M. Anderson. In recalling the catastrophe of Bhopal, Anderson said that the disaster was "a shattering kind of experience" for him personally. His reaction to the initial report of 36 people dead had been "one of disbelief." In the chemical industry, he said, 36 fatalities is "a mind-boggling number." And as the fatalities "crept up and crept up, [he asked himself] how could it happen?"

Now there are some 2,500 reported dead and thousands more injured. In addition, there are some clues as to why and how it happened. One of them was provided by Hatim Mohammed Jariwala, the general secretary of a union at the Bhopal plant. Citing a growing loss of revenue, he said the plant management had cut back on trained staff. Two key safety features at the plant had not worked for more than a month. "The refrigerating unit, which cooled the plant and the MIC tanks where the gas leaked from, has not functioned since 1982," he told the *New York Times*.

Union Carbide has a history of cutting corners. In 1981, Bob Wyrick of *Newsday* described conditions at a Union Carbide's Cimanggis battery plant in Indonesia. He spoke with Dr. Meizar Syafei, who was employed in 1977 as the company's health officer there. Two years later, citing the lack of professionalism, she quit. Soon after she was hired, Union Carbide officials told Dr. Meizar they would install new dust collectors in the room where battery chemicals were mixed. But when Indonesia's currency was devalued in November 1978, "they said they didn't want to spend the money."

In her first year on the job, Dr. Meizar treated 83 workers for kidney and urinary problems of the sort often caused by exposure to mercury and other heavy metals. By the end of 1977, the number of kidney cases had increased to 120. A test showed that the plant's well water contained mercury levels as high as 47 parts per million. In the U.S., the EPA's acceptable level for mercury in drinking water is 2 parts per million. By 1978, there were 402 employees suffering from kidney diseases. Meizar finally persuaded the company to switch from contaminated wells to bottled water for drinking and preparing workers' meals. "But they said I may not tell the workers that there is mercury in the drinking water," she told Wyrick. "They said the workers would become anxious."

"People are our most important asset," says Union Carbide. "Their safety and health are our greatest responsibility." And the Indonesian government says, in an invitation to foreign investors, "The more you know about our opportunities, the more you'll want to come. One of our greatest assets are our industrious and willing people, combined with your guaranteed FREEDOM TO MAN-AGE..." ■