British company leaks deadly gas into residential areas

Robert Stevens
12 June 1998

On May 30 the chemical wastage plant SARP UK leaked a highly poisonous cloud of nitric-dioxide gas over the village of Killamarsh in north Derbyshire and surrounding areas. Residents in three separate counties were affected. More than 20,000 people were forced indoors as the 300-foot plume of thick orange gas spread over the area.

SARP UK is based at the Norwood Industrial Estate in Killamarsh. Vivendi, one of France's top five companies and a main manufacturer of the world's supply of bottled water, owns the company. It was formally known as Leigh Environmental.

The chemical leak was the second in just 16 days. The gas was released when nitric acid leaked from a nine tonne storage tank. A local resident, Dave Burton, warned that whilst they had been "lucky" on this occasion, "there are several similar tanks which could rupture at any time."

Security guards had initially refused fire fighters entrance to the site, claiming the danger was under control. Only when more fire fighters arrived were they admitted. They found that the plant's fire hose was leaking and had not been repaired after the earlier emergency. SARP UK has been closed temporarily for an investigation by Health and Safety inspectors.

The factory is located just 60 yards from the Rother Valley Country Park, an area of outstanding natural beauty that attracts some 750,000 visitors a year. Another heavily populated area is the nearby Crystal Peaks shopping centre. Police helicopters had to warn shoppers about the danger through an amplification system.

Worryingly, SARP UK is located next to the local school, attended by more than 600 pupils and another school is also in the vicinity.

Since the gas leak, hundreds of local residents have packed three meetings, including a meeting of the parish council, demanding the closure of SARP UK. At one meeting on June 1 a young resident, Rachel Jackson asked, "Am I going to die in 20 years? I overlook the plant and constantly suffer the smell and wake up with headaches. As a child I was exposed to contamination from the accident in the mid-1980s. I'm the only one in my family with asthma."

Julie Rivington, a mother of four, complained of nausea and a sore throat for several days after the May 30 spillage. She said, "It couldn't be anything else. It only started on Saturday after the leak. I was throwing up on Monday morning and my throat was still sore. I am absolutely livid about it. I am not just thinking about my health or my children's health. I'm thinking about the health of my children's children in the future. I want to stay in Killamarsh and live a healthy life."

The Killamarsh factory has a history of major public health threats and unsafe and secretive practises:

• In 1986, aerosol canisters exploded, resulting in a major fire and a number of other explosions. In total 16 people were taken to hospital.

• In February 1988 the company was investigated after fumes overcame a bulldozer driver when he punctured a plastic drum on a waste tip site. Leigh Environmental had dumped the drum despite a ban on the disposal of chemical waste on the site. A week earlier Blackleigh, a subsidiary of Leigh Environmental, was fined £1,500 for failing to ensure safety at work.

• In 1989 school dinner ladies had to move hundreds of pupils into the school when they saw "a noxious cloud".

• In 1991 the firm refused to allow Yorkshire Water to publish details of sewerage tests taken on its site, claiming commercial confidentiality and that "to

© World Socialist Web Site

release incomplete information may mislead and provoke unnecessary concerns."

• In 1994, the company refused to reveal details of its air pollution and was served an enforcement notice by the Inspectorate of Pollution.

The local Independent European Parliament MEP, Ken Coates, commented, "Dogs and cats have died following the incident. One woman's Yorkshire terrier died last Sunday after the toxic cloud passed over on Thursday. People have shown us plants, which seem to have been burnt and we collected leaves, which were damaged with large white patches around their rims. The toxic cloud went into the county park and passed over hawthorn trees which were blasted and burnt."

Killamarsh Parish Council has passed a resolution calling for the factory to be closed and, until this is done, for the firm to implement a series of safety measures. They are also demanding a public inquiry by the Environment Agency and the Health and Safety Executive.

Sheffield Labour Party-controlled City Council has made vague calls for stricter controls at the factory and an assurance from SARP UK that no more leaks will occur. In response the company announced it would adopt new emergency measures, including the installation of a siren to warn people in the event of a future leak!

A spokesman for the firm said that it had conducted its own investigation and was satisfied with the results. He added that more chemicals could be processed at the plant immediately. "There is no reason why we cannot receive material today, but we want to learn the lessons from this incident and get back to restoring the site's good safety record of the last few years."

Residents of Killamarsh plan a march on June 13, to be followed by a public meeting on June 16.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site