

Indian chemical workers appeal for support

Terry Cook
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More than 200 workers at Hema Chemical Industries on the Gorwa industrial estate at Vadodara in the Indian state of Gujarat have been on strike since early December, fighting the company's refusal to improve safety in its factories in line with the state's health and safety regulations.

The strike erupted when the management refused to negotiate a log of claims, including safety improvements and a wage rise, and abruptly stopped paying the workers for holidays and festivals.

The company operates two plants on the estate, manufacturing potassium and sodium bichromate, basic chromium sulphate and other chromium-based chemicals widely used in alloy and metal plating, wood preservatives, coloured glass, glaze, textile dyes and pigments used in lithography.

The production process in one plant involves the crushing of chromate ore into small pieces, mixing it with soda ash and then roasting the mixture at temperatures ranging from 1,100 to 1,200 degrees centigrade. The other plant manufactures bichromate chromium. Despite intense heat, and a high concentration of dust and a chromium acid mist, ventilation in the plants is non-existent. Workers are forced to breathe in the dust and chemicals for the entire working day.

The hazards of working with chromium are well documented. Chromium is a human carcinogen. Bichromate is a hexavalent chromium that is known to cause lung cancer and kidney damage, as well as pulmonary oedema, chronic rhinitis, pharyngitis, nasal septum perforation, dermatitis and painful skin ulcers, known as "chrome ulcers," that are exceedingly slow to heal. Chromic acid mist also causes toxic jaundice and liver damage.

Most of the Hema workers suffer from these work-related diseases. A medical examination by a surgeon from the region's factory inspectors office revealed that

43 workers were suffering from nasal septum perforations and 23 others from chronic dermatitis. Two workers suffered from ulcers on the feet that would not heal and had toes amputated following secondary infections and gangrene. One was found to also have suffered damage to his kidneys and gall bladder.

The surgeon's report exposes only part of the real situation. A systematic medical examination has never been conducted at Hema. Nor has the government acted to enforce its own safety regulations. Even following the medical report the inspectorate failed to measure emissions in the plant. The company's disregard for safety is well known. At the end of 1996 an explosion at its subsidiary company, Ushma Chemical, in Nandesari cost the lives of four workers.

Last year the *Indian Express* newspaper drew attention to the conditions at Hema and the lack of action by the regional government. "The normal response in such a situation would be to shut the factory down until the working environment was brought into conformity with legal standards. But who is going to do that?" it asked.

"Government agencies are not made accountable to anyone. Proprietors will remain indifferent as long as regulations are not enforced and unions are ineffective. So as long as there are more poor, illiterate people outside the factory gate looking for a job, those inside will be treated as expendable, as a subhuman species."

The strikers at Hema are appealing to working people internationally to support their struggle both financially and by sending letters condemning the actions of the company and the government.

Faxes and letters should be sent to:

The Chief Minister

Government of Gujarat

Sachivalaya

Gandhinagar

Fax: 91 2712 22101

Mahendra Patel

Proprietor

Hema Chemical Industries

4/13, B IDC, GORWA

Vorodara 390 016

INDIA

Fax: 0091-265 380 129

Messages of support can be sent to:

Thakorbbhai Shah

101, Shree Krishna Apartment No 2,

Opposite Kothi Police Parade Ground, Raopura,

Vadodara, 390 001, Gujarat

INDIA

Fax: 91 265-412499/412224

Email: ics@lwbdq.lwbbs.net



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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