

Dow and Union Carbide to merge: two companies that have profited from the deaths of thousands

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Dow Chemical and Union Carbide announced a corporate merger Wednesday, with Dow acquiring control of the smaller firm through a stock swap and assuming its debts, in a deal worth \$11.6 billion.

Dow and Union Carbide are corporations responsible for some of the worst atrocities inflicted by American capitalism on the working people of the world. Dow became notorious as the manufacturer of napalm and Agent Orange, the chemicals used by the US military in the Vietnam War to incinerate villages and defoliate the countryside. Union Carbide caused the single worst industrial disaster in history, the toxic chemical leak in Bhopal, India that killed as many as 10,000 people and injured 200,000.

During the Vietnam War, Dow Chemical became synonymous with the brutality and ruthlessness of the American military assault on the Vietnamese people. It was the sole supplier of napalm, the jellied gasoline first developed by American chemists during World War II, and perfected at the company's laboratory in Midland, Michigan.

Napalm inflicts particularly horrible injuries, burning its victims and melting their skin so that they cannot get the substance off their bodies. The victims are slowly roasted to death. Huge quantities were dropped over Vietnam on "suspected" enemy targets—i.e., any village or hamlet unlucky enough to draw the attention of the American military.

The savagery of this weapon was dramatized internationally in the famous photograph of a young, naked Vietnamese girl screaming in pain as she runs down a road, fleeing a US air strike which dropped napalm on her village. Dow's role in the manufacture of napalm brought it worldwide notoriety, and Dow

corporate recruiters were driven from American college campuses during the heyday of the antiwar protest movement.

Dow's other contribution to the Vietnam War arsenal, Agent Orange, is famous as much for its effects on American soldiers as for the toll of death and suffering among the Vietnamese. Agent Orange was a defoliant sprayed over millions of acres of Vietnam to kill the jungle in which National Liberation Front guerrillas hid during the fighting. One component of Agent Orange is dioxin, one of the most toxic substances ever devised by American industry.

Tens of the thousands of American soldiers and airmen who were exposed to Agent Orange suffered the effects of chemical poisoning—cancers, brain and nerve damage, damage to reproductive organs. The number of Vietnamese exposed to the chemical certainly numbers in the millions, no doubt with similar consequences in terms of disease, death and birth defects, but there has never been a comprehensive study of the Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange.

More recently, Dow Chemical has been linked to enormous suffering attributed to the activities of its subsidiary Dow Corning, a joint venture with the New York-based ceramics company. Dow Corning was for many decades the leading manufacturer of silicone breast implants, and it has been the principal target of lawsuits by women citing illnesses caused by the implants themselves or by leaks of silicone gel. At one point the company agreed to a settlement of the lawsuits at the cost of \$3.2 billion, but the issue remains in the courts.

Dow Chemical itself was never involved in the breast implant suits because Dow Corning is a legally

independent corporate entity. American parents can, in the name of "personal responsibility," be jailed for the misconduct of their minor children. But parent *corporations* are immune from liability for the actions of their offspring, no matter how reckless or even criminal.

Union Carbide, like Dow, has had a major role in the American military-industrial complex. For more than four decades it managed the nuclear laboratory and production complex in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where uranium was refined for the making of the atomic bomb which incinerated Hiroshima, and for the subsequent buildup of the US nuclear arsenal.

In the 1970s and 1980s, like many budding multinational firms, the company began to develop an extensive network of overseas production facilities. The Union Carbide plant in Bhopal was one of many chemical plants built in third world countries where health and safety regulations were either nonexistent, or deliberately kept to a minimum as an incentive to foreign investors. The Bhopal plant was not equipped with computerized monitoring and warning systems, such as those which are standard at similar plants in the United States and Western Europe.

On the night of December 3, 1984, while the residents of Bhopal slept, 50 tons of methyl isocyanate, a chemical used in the manufacture of pesticides, were released from the Union Carbide factory. The cloud wafted over the poorest, largely working-class section of the city—in India, as in America, chemical factories are not located in the neighborhoods where chemical company executives live.

Methyl isocyanate is five times more toxic than the phosgene (mustard gas) used as a weapon in the trench warfare of World War I. It is especially damaging to the soft tissues of the body—eyes, mouth, nose, throat, lungs, reproductive organs. Many of the victims died by drowning on their own mucus and vomit. Pulmonary edema—the filling of the lungs with fluid—is the medical term.

The long-term consequences of the gas exposure are still being felt in India. Tens of thousands suffered severe lung damage and are crippled for life. Thousands suffered partial or total blindness. Most pregnant women exposed to the gas suffered spontaneous abortions and stillbirths. Birth defects were much higher in Bhopal for years after the disaster.

From the standpoint of capitalist law, Bhopal was an "accident," and not an act of homicide against a helpless population. It was a nonetheless monstrous crime. Subsequent investigations revealed that there had been repeated safety violations at the plant—faulty valves, cracked storage tanks, a lack of automated systems for filling tanks or stopping gas leaks, a lack of emergency evacuation procedures, a total lack of training of the plant staff.

No Union Carbide executive or manager spent so much as one day in prison as a consequence of Bhopal. The company ultimately paid \$470 million to the government of India, some of which was distributed to the victims—about one year's profits.

By contrast, the value of Union Carbide stock jumped by almost four times that much, nearly \$1.6 billion, following the announcement of Wednesday's merger, which the stock market regarded as highly favorable to the company. Union Carbide CEO William Joyce stands to pocket a personal windfall of nearly \$1 million from a clause in his contract which gives him a large bonus if the company's stock price goes above \$64 a share. The merger announcement touched off a market rally which drove the price of Union Carbide stock from \$55 to \$67.



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