

Germany: No end in sight for Envio toxic pollution scandal

Catherine Wied
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The scandal surrounding the Dortmund environmental disaster is mounting as further incriminating evidence comes to light.

Industrial capacitors (devices for storing electrical energy) were improperly dismantled and disposed of at the Envio recycling company in Dortmund's port area. For years, employees of the company—which has since gone into bankruptcy—were contaminated with cancer-inducing toxins such as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and dioxins.

Blood tests administered last year revealed that 95 percent of Envio workers had PCB contamination exceeding standard levels 8,600-fold, and in the worse cases 25,000-fold. Toxins had also spread into the surroundings, necessitating a ban on the consumption of vegetables in nearby allotments.

The wide-scale contamination of workers and the environment was not only due to the lack of managerial control of a small company, which grew rapidly following financial investment. As documented by the press and other media reports in recent weeks, rather it is the case that Envio's unscrupulous conduct was aided and concealed by forces operating at the highest governmental, political and business levels.

An unpublished report, commissioned by the environment ministry and revealed in a WDR television broadcast on March 20, concludes that the Arnsberg district administration made serious mistakes in its monitoring duties, allowing the company to continue operating unimpeded for years, despite gross violations and numerous warnings.

Internal documents leaked to the press show that Envio's transactions with Boris Meckler, the convicted arms dealer, were covered up by administrators—including some in the federal economics ministry—and even subsidised to the extent of millions of euros.

In September 2010, the press had already reported on Envio's business relations with criminal elements in Kazakhstan. At that time, however, only a few details about the involvement of high-level supervisory authorities were known. The public certainly had doubts about the investigative procedures followed by the state prosecutor's office, which claimed at that time to have no knowledge of the supply of contaminated capacitors from a disused rocket site in Kazakhstan. But a cloak

of secrecy was soon drawn over this, when the general prosecutor's office in Hamm concluded its "supervisory review" by declaring there was no reason to terminate the Dortmund prosecutor's investigation of the case.

Meanwhile, more details have emerged to raise the suspicion that the only reason for the public prosecution department's ignorance of the deliveries from Kazakhstan was that it did not want to know about them.

The WDR regional television programme "Westpol" reported February 13 that the district administration in Arnsberg had been fully informed in June 2009 about the involvement of Envio's business partner, Meckler, in criminal transactions. It had received the news from the German embassy in Astana, Kazakhstan, more than a year before the *Westfälische Rundschau* (WR) newspaper published a report on the deals.

Accompanied by Meckler only two weeks later, the Kazakh environment minister—whose department was involved in the criminal arrangements—was received by the district administration. It is hard to believe that the prosecutor's department had no knowledge of this. After all, it had initially seized files from Envio's premises in May 2010, and also carried out preliminary investigations into the activities of the district administration, following allegations of misconduct. Envio itself had purposely established the firm, Envio Kazakhstan GmbH, to facilitate the Kazakhstan deal.

Since the beginning of February of this year, it has also been known that the German federal government had apparently been enthusiastically promoting Envio's business activities for years. It is said to have provided around €8 million for the "transport of carcinogenic substances to Dortmund for disposal purposes". In doing so, it had also allowed itself to be "commercially" represented by Meckler, the arms dealer suspected of embezzlement. Such was reported by the WR, drawing on a confidential memorandum of the North Rhine-Westphalia environment ministry.

The internal document from the NRW ministry, which focused on the conduct of the district government in light of the scandalous revelations, contained further poignant details. According to the WR, for example, it proved "for the first time a connection between the federal environment ministry, led by Norbert Röttgen (Christian Social Union—CDU), and the

pollution scandal”.

Following this, Röttgen turned up “in Kazakhstan in mid-July 2010, two months after the closure of the PCB disposal plant...at the side of Chancellor Angela Merkel”. In line with the implementation of an “ecological programme” there, Röttgen “continued [securing] support for the Röttgen ministry”. The Kazakh environment ministry was therefore in a position to declare, “once again we will soon be able to count on exporting PCB to Dortmund with the help of the Germans”.

Boris Meckler had already enjoyed the patronage of the German government in 2007. At that time, he travelled to Kazakhstan as an official member of a business delegation, along with the German economics minister, Michael Glos (CSU), in order to further his Envio interests. As co-owner of the contaminated area, he was clearly pursuing a personal interest. Questioned by Westpol as to why Meckler had been included in the official delegation in 2007, the Federal Economics Ministry replied tersely: “The decision regarding participation in a business delegation is made in each case based on technical expertise and regional interests.”

At the time, Meckler’s range of “technical expertise” included the supply of “equipment for military and special forces” and “planning and organising the training of anti-terror special forces”. These were all facets of the activity of his company Juwenta Ltd. as listed in the German business directory. It also appears that Meckler’s criminal record was no hindrance to his inclusion in the delegation. According to “Westpol”, Meckler had been convicted of the embezzlement of government funds in 1985 and sentenced to eight years in prison by a Soviet court.

The federal government also has a lot to explain. The *WR* reports that, according to Envio, only three deliveries of contaminated capacitors arrived in Dortmund in 2010. According to the district government, however, 6 deliveries had taken place and no fewer than 50 had been authorised. There are major discrepancies between the reported figures of the federal and regional administrations that remain to be explained.

The legal case against Envio is still dragging on. The prosecution authorities are saying nothing while the Envio subsidiary EnvioRecycling GmbH has conveniently declared bankruptcy, thus transferring the financial consequences of the contamination of people and environment to the taxpayer. There is no indication of a breakthrough in the investigation of the remaining Envio companies. This means that the situation for the infected workers, their families and the witnesses who brought the case to public is increasingly threatening.

On January 24, one of the workers who had worked for years on premises adjacent to Envio died. He collapsed suddenly at

his workplace and could not be saved despite first-aid measures and the attention of paramedics. The exact cause of his death remains unclear despite an initial autopsy.

Establishing the cause of death is the job of the prosecutor’s office in Dortmund, which has refrained from making any announcement. Nevertheless, it has been established that the man was one of a group that had been massively contaminated with PCBs, and that he had been questioned by the prosecutor’s office prior to his death as to how the poison had entered his body.

The *WR* also reported on threats made against witnesses who had been questioned or called for questioning by the prosecutor’s office. After interrogation, one witness was immediately provided police protection. Another, who had detailed knowledge about the Kazakhstan deal and had also been threatened, told the *WR* he feared for his life.

The facts revealed in recent weeks and months make clear that the Envio scandal is not just the result of the machinations of the greedy but otherwise insignificant management of a small sweatshop. In the background, major business and political figures have been at work to ensure that Envio could gain access to the millions to be made in waste management.

This is the most likely explanation for the move by Dr. Thomas Hartkopf, former member of the executive EnBW, the third largest energy company in Germany, to the supervisory board of Envio AG in 2007. As former manager of the Baden-Württemberg energy giant, Hartkopf no doubt has extensive business and political ties. In fact, the relationship between Hartkopf and Envio goes back to the period 1983-1994, when he worked for the ABB Group. Envio originally emerged from the waste management division of ABB following a management buy-out in 2004.

The revelations made so far in the course of the Envio scandal make abundantly clear that those workers and local residents who have been contaminated cannot expect any effective investigation from the authorities, or that measures will be taken against the company and its political backers.



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