

Italian Chemical Disaster

Possible Here? Michigan neglects safeguards.

R.F.

1976

Since the July 10th explosion at an Italian Chemical plant outside of the northern Italian city of Seveso, information has come to light to indicate that Michigan could be the setting for a similar disaster.

The explosion at the Icmesa plant, which sickened 500 persons and caused a mass evacuation of the area released approximately 4 1/2 pounds of the chemical dioxin (TCDD) into the atmosphere. TCDD is considered to be “the most toxic small molecule known to science—so dangerous that it is toxic at concentrations as low as one part per trillion.

This same chemical is produced at the Dow Chemical facility in Midland, Michigan, 90 miles north of Detroit, and like the Italian plant, disaster notifications are left entirely to the discretion of the plant management. In Italy, the Icmesa plant officials waited a full two weeks before informing the government about the accident.

With Seveso being a highly industrial sector, the pollution from factories is often so bad that reports of animals and elderly people choking to death are not uncommon. No one living in the area thought twice about the white cloud of dioxin that was discharged from the factory’s smokestack—their acquaintance with living with such high amounts of pollution left the citizens vulnerable to such industrial “accidents” and their devastating effects.

Since the release of the chemical, reports of small animals dying and vegetation withering have been in pages of newspapers and magazines around the world, but what has been much less reported in the news is what effect TCDD has had upon residents of the affected area. We do know that during the two-week period after the explosion, workers at Icmesa and the inhabitants of Seveso experienced headaches, profuse sweating, kidney and liver pains, violent vomiting, acute diarrhea and a grotesque skin infection called Chloracne, which leaves the skin pitted and covered with red patches.

The Phenoxy Herbicides

Perhaps the reason for keeping quiet dioxin’s effects on humans is that dioxin is an inevitable byproduct in the manufacture of the more than 60 herbicides that are lumped together under the heading, Phenoxy type. Of these, 2,4,5 trichlorophenol (2,4,5T)—which was being produced at the Icmesa plant—and 2,4 dichlorophenol (2,4-D), are the two most widely used herbicides in the world today. Combined, they make up the notorious defoliant “Agent Orange,” of which hundreds of millions of gallons were sprayed over the countryside and rice fields of both North and South Vietnam by the U.S. Air Force during the Vietnam war.

The Fifth Estate contacted Wyandotte Chemical, located outside of Detroit, and inquired as to whether they were engaged in the production of Phenoxy herbicides. Wyandotte is a subsidiary of the German chemical firm BASE, which is a major producer of herbicides and whose plants had several accidents during the 1950s involving TCDD.

After getting the run-around from the Wyandotte Chemical public relations offices and having us call New York City, New Jersey, and Chicago, their top scientist, Dr. Bissing, “assured” the *Fifth Estate*, that Wyandotte no longer produced Phenoxy herbicides. A check of government agencies disclosed that there is no way of checking the accuracy of this statement as chemical plants are not required to list the products they manufacture.

Dow—The Largest Producer

Since the end of the Vietnam war, the world’s largest manufacturer of 2,4,5-T and 2,4-D has been producing the herbicides for use by crop farmers and ranchers to clear their lands of weeds (according to the *Tulsa Daily World*, 2,4,5-T is “the big T in Meat”), and for the spraying of parks and forests by the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Agriculture.

The use of Phenoxy herbicides is so widespread, in fact, that researchers now looking for traces of TCDD in women’s milk have found preliminary indications of its presence. This may have disastrous effects on new-born children since TCDD is a thousand times more dangerous to fetuses than tetragen, the deforming agent in the now-infamous thalidomide.

I’m Telling You My Dear; It Can Happen Here!

Another reason for the cover-up is that the “accident” at the Icmesa plant is not the first of its kind and the precautions against such a disaster occurring here in Michigan are not much better than those taken at the Italian plant.

In 1937, 21 workers at the Dow plant in Midland were treated for cysts, kidney damage and Chloracne caused by their contact with TCDD, then an unknown agent. The plant was temporarily closed.

Then in 1964, 70 workers at the same plant suffered from similar symptoms. One worker at the Dow plant told us that even though employees working with TCDD-related chemicals are continuously watched by monitoring cameras, compelled to take showers at the end of each shift, and periodically ordered to wear dust detectors around their necks to take readings on the amount of harmful elements in the air they breathe, the real danger is explosions.

The Dow Midland plant is made up of many old shops, built in the early part of this century, with little space between each one. Our contact there told us that there was recently an explosion in one of the shops manufacturing plastics, and that fortunately it was confined to that area. He went on to say, “If there was a bad explosion, it would be a chain reaction moving from one building to another.”

EPA A Puppet

Inquiring-at the Lansing branch of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a government bureaucracy ostensibly formed for the purpose of protecting the air and water from pollution, we asked about possible “accidents” concerning dioxin and other toxic chemicals. Dave Dennis, EPA bureau head, told the *fifth Estate*, “There are no records, to my knowledge, on what harmful chemicals are produced by companies like Wyandotte Chemical and Dow.”

“We would rely,” he continued, “solely on those companies telling us if there had been a leak of harmful chemicals into the air or water.”

This is the same policy that was in effect in Italy on July 10th, with the owners of Icmesa knowing of the disaster within hours after it happened. Yet they waited TWO weeks before reporting it!

The reason for this lack of information and concern on the part of the EPA is simple. Looking over the record of the EPA’s decisions on 2, 4, 5-T suggests that Dow has successfully exerted pressure on the agency concerning its products. About four years ago the newly-founded EPA announced that it would hold hearings to consider banning all uses of 2, 4, 5-T. Dow obtained a court injunction blocking EPA proceedings against the herbicides for two years. In mid-1973, the EPA postponed deliberation on 2, 4, 5-T while it conducted a “dioxin monitoring program”.

According to the agency, pure 2, 4, 5-T does not represent a health hazard and dioxin will not be considered a hazard until scientists are able to document its threat to public health by “bioaccumulation in man and the human food chain”. Dioxin has been found in birds in Oregon, small animals in Virginia, and recently in slices of commercial beef. Still the EPA has not moved to ban 2, 4, 5-T.

Agency officials now insist that four separate laboratories examine the beef slices, explaining that the tested cattle were not allowed to mature fully, therefore containing more TCDD per bite than fatter cattle, and that the study incorrectly-tested fat.

“I think that very few people eat beef fat,” objected EPA senior advisor William Upholt.

No Alternatives Within Capitalism

Even if TCDD were found in human tissue, Upholt has said, “It doesn’t necessarily mean we should ban 2, 4, 5-T. I think we’ll have to do a lot more testing before we can evaluate what sort of risk there is to man at these levels.”

It’s quite obvious that agencies such as the EPA are not and can not protect us from the devastating effects of a chemical explosion on the level of the one in Italy.

By becoming nothing but an extension of Dow, the EPA has left us wide open to a host of biological deformities and afflictions.

There just are no alternatives within capitalism, individual or state, in relation to the ensuing plagues brought on by industrialization. Eating healthy, organic foods doesn’t even do half the job; the apples in the shops, food co-ops, and farmers’ markets may have been among those treated with a TCDD compound.

And, putting all of one’s faith in science and medicine, the main supporters and creators of industrialization, is nothing but unimaginative suicide.

The only hope we have left is a revolution which destroys the existing order and all of its institutions from the roots. A revolution that will create a completely new society based on human needs instead of a highly industrial society based on the need for ever-expanding production.

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Fifth Estate #277, October 1976

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