

Activists Challenge Dow on Bhopal, Persistent Toxic Pollutants

By Ted Sylvester

Activists from Michigan joined a delegation from Bhopal, India, in confronting Dow Chemical executives and shareholders at the corporation's May 8 Annual General Meeting in

ate gases leaked from a Union Carbide pesticide factory into a residential community of over half a million. The ICJB estimates that 20,000 people have died (8,000 in the first few days) and an additional 120,000 survivors live with chronic and debilitating gas-

affected by Dow Chemical and to raise awareness about Dow's crimes in Bhopal. The three were in the eighth day of a twelve-day hunger strike at the time of the Dow shareholder meeting.

A demonstration, organized by the Ecology Center and the ICJB, took place outside the Midland Center for the Arts as shareholders arrived for the meeting. About 30 protesters carried dramatic 11-foot-tall photo banners and large photos from Bhopal. A number of demonstrators, including Bee, Shukla, and Satinath, held proxy passes and were allowed inside. After general business was discussed the activists had their chance to speak in a question-and-answer session with Dow President and CEO William Stavropoulos.

The session was dominated by testimonies and questions from activists and community members concerned with detrimental Dow practices and products. A resident of the Tittabawassee River floodplain, for example, spoke about issues related to the massive dioxin contamination of the river's floodplain for miles downstream from Dow's Midland plant. CEO Stavropoulos was also asked about cleanup plans for the Myrtle Grove trailer park in Plaquemine, Louisiana, where the water is contaminated with vinyl chloride — allegedly from a nearby Dow PVC manufacturing plant.

But the question that caused the most controversy came from Rashida Bee. She asked Stavropoulos why Dow accepted Union Carbide's asbestos liabilities in the U.S. but refused to be accountable for damages in Bhopal. Stavropoulos said that while asbestos

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Bhopal survivors Rashida Bee (left) and Champa Devi Shukla take part in a May 8 demonstration at Dow's shareholder meeting in Midland, Michigan.

Midland, Michigan. Rashida Bee, Champa Devi Shukla, and Satinath Sarangi, members of the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal, made the long journey from home to pressure Dow shareholders and executives for justice for the victims of the 1984 Union Carbide gas disaster in Bhopal.

In 2001, Union Carbide Corporation became a wholly owned subsidiary of Dow Chemical Corporation, yet Dow refuses to acknowledge its liability to the people of Bhopal, where 40 tons of poisonous methyl isocyan-

related ailments.

Rashida Bee and Champa Devi Shukla are two women survivors of the disaster, and leaders of the ICJB. Bee lost nine members of her family to the gases and suffers from semi-blindness, breathing difficulties, and other gas-related illnesses. The poisonous fumes cost Shukla her health and her husband. Both women have grandchildren with birth defects common to babies born to gas-affected parents.

Bee, Shukla, and longtime Bhopal activist Satinath Sarangi, were in the U.S. for a 40-day tour of communities



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claims were pending in the U.S. he knew of no such pending liabilities against Union Carbide in Bhopal. Bee later said, in a May 15 article in *CorpWatch*, that the CEO's statement was "misleading to the shareholders."

"Actually, our chairman did misspeak," a Dow spokesperson admitted to *CorpWatch* in the same article. "We are fully aware that Union Carbide and [former CEO] Anderson were both named in criminal charges in India." In fact, in 1986 Union Carbide Corporation, its former chairman Warren Anderson, and ten others were charged with manslaughter among other crimes. According to an ICJB press release, India's Central Bureau of Investigation on April 9, 2003 indicated it would ask the Bhopal court to include Dow as an accused party in the ongoing criminal case against Union Carbide.

According to a May 12 press release: "ICJB calls upon Dow, the new owners of Union Carbide, to face longstanding criminal charges against UC in India, release toxicological information regarding the poison gases, arrange for long-term medical

rehabilitation and monitoring, provide economic rehabilitation and social support for survivors' children, and clean up the toxic wastes and contaminated groundwater in and around Carbide's old factory site."

Though Stavropoulos may have lied outright to Rashida Bee, and provided other activists and community members with unsatisfying answers to their inquiries, environmental activists did not come away from the meeting without a victory. A resolution sponsored by Trillium, a socially responsible investment fund, called for Dow to author a report detailing the company's dioxin liabilities, as well as its plans to meet the phase-out goals of two international treaties on persistent organic pollutants. The resolution received 6.9% of the vote by shareholders, a substantial showing for the first year, and enough to forward a similar resolution next year. The resolution also set an important precedent at the SEC, advancing the interests of shareholders seeking disclosure of environmental liabilities. Ecology Center staff served as advisers to Trillium on the content

of the resolution, as well as in negotiations with the company.

When the Bhopal delegation ended their hunger strike on May 12 at the Gandhi Statue in front of the Indian Embassy in Washington, D.C., they called upon supporters to keep the strike alive until the 19th Bhopal anniversary on Dec. 3, 2003. Supporters can sign on to the Worldwide Relay Hunger Strike by registering at www.bhopal.net. More than 200 people from 19 countries have joined the global fast so far. There are many ways to support the cause of justice for the Bhopal gas victims. A good place to start is by contacting Justice for Bhopal, a local affiliate of ICJB, at bhopal.info@umich.edu. For upcoming events, including weekly meeting times and location, visit www.umich.edu/~bhopal.

This article was based on reports from the Ecology Center's Rebecca Meuninck, ICJB press releases, and information from "Bhopal Survivors Confront Dow," *CorpWatch*, May 15, 2003. Ted Sylvester is editor of *From the Ground Up*.