

# Dow's Dirty Deeds

## New campaigns target chemical industry giant

by Rebecca Meuninck

Activists couldn't ask for a bigger target than Dow Chemical Corporation. The company is now, by some measures, the largest chemical corporation in the world. Its impacts on the environment and human health, and attempts to shirk responsibility for its actions, have been arguably representative of the chemical industry as a whole. In light of Dow's history of irresponsible behavior, its current product line, and its prowess within the chemical industry, the company has become the target of a growing number of environmental campaigns.

On its climb to the top of the chemical industry ladder, Dow has left behind a myriad of environmentally detrimental practices, products, and problems. Dow Chemical has produced some of the most notorious poisons known to man. This list includes: chemical weapons like mustard gas, Agent Orange, and napalm; pesticides like 2,4,5-trichlorophenol, 2,4,D, Dursban (chlorypyrifos); and vinyl chloride monomer and ethylene dichloride — the building blocks of PVC plastic. The company also produces an herbicide, which is contaminating composting operations in several regions in the country. With this record, it is clear to see why a number of environmental campaigns are targeting the chemical giant.

According to a Greenpeace report, Dow Chemical is the world's

largest producer of chlorine and chlorine-based products, the largest producer of chlorinated pesticides and chlorinated solvents in the U.S., and the largest producer of chemicals used to produce PVC

### Dow and dioxin contamination in Michigan

Dow's production facilities in Midland have been engaged in dioxin-creating activities for more than 60 years. Over the years



Demonstrators protest the reproductive threats of Dow Chemical products at the company's 2001 shareholder meeting.

photo: Paul Engstrom

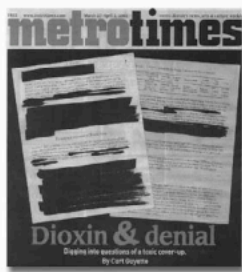
plastic on the planet. One of the unintended byproducts of the manufacture and incineration of these chemicals is dioxin. Dioxin is toxic to life in tiny amounts. It is carcinogenic and a potent immune, hormone, and reproductive system toxin. Dow's dioxin-producing practices have had a substantial impact on the local communities that host these facilities, as well as the general population. Currently every person on the planet has some dioxin in their bodies. Dow's products and operations have contributed some portion of that loading.

dioxin released into the air, and directly into the Tittabawassee River that runs next to the plant site, has contaminated the surrounding community in Midland, and for miles downriver to Saginaw.

larg1998, showed similarly high levels of dioxin contamination on Dow property downwind from the manufacturing site, located next to residential and community areas.

Unfortunately, Dow's dioxin contamination has spread much further than just Midland. In the January/February issue of *From the Ground Up* we reported on the extensive dioxin contamination 22

miles downstream from Dow's Midland headquarters. Testing conducted in the spring of 2000 uncovered the extremely high levels of dioxin in the river's



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floodplain. Follow-up tests conducted by the MDEQ found dioxin levels up to 7,200 ppt, 80 times higher than the 90 ppt cleanup criteria in the state. The contamination was widespread, deep, and serious throughout the floodplain. Levels of dioxin upriver from Dow's manufacturing facility were not elevated.

After the dioxin contamination downriver in the Tittabawassee floodplain was discovered, residents living in and around Saginaw and Bay City formed the Tittabawassee River Watch. The Tittabawassee River Watch became the newest member of a coalition of groups in Michigan working to hold Dow accountable for their actions and pressure the company to clean up its contamination. The Tittabawassee River Watch also filed as a plaintiff to stop the MDEQ's consent order on dioxin cleanup standards in Midland.

As we reported in previous issues of *From the Ground Up*, the Ecology Center, along with other coalition members including Environmental Health Watch, Lone Tree

Council, the Michigan Environmental Council, the Tittabawassee River Watch, and others, took the state to court over a planned "sweetheart deal" between Dow and the former Engler Administration, an agreement that would have raised the dioxin cleanup standard in Midland to ten times the health standard that applies to the rest of the state, and would have opened the door to extending that standard to the entire contamination area. The outcome of that legal challenge was successful, and eventually the state scuttled the deal.

At press time, citizens that live along the floodplain announced a class action lawsuit against the Dow for contamination of their neighborhoods. More on that in future issues of this newsletter.

### Dow's responsibility in Bhopal, India

Dow's toxic legacy does not end at Michigan's borders. Halfway across the world in Bhopal, India, survivors of the 1984 Union Carbide gas disaster continue to suffer from the effects of the gas leak and pollution from an abandoned pesticide factory. The gas leak started at a Union Carbide pesticide factory on the evening of Dec. 2 and was not discovered until the next day. Methyl Isocyanate gas leaked from the factory after six safety measures designed to stop such a leak failed. During the first three days of the disaster 8,000 people in Bhopal perished. Estimates vary, but since then as many as 20,000 lives have been claimed and more than 150,000 people are now chronically ill as a direct result of the gas leak or due to the ongoing contamination of the abandoned factory site.

The abandoned facility in

Bhopal is contaminated with heavy metals like mercury, lead, and chromium, and dangerous pesticides like Sevin. In 1999 Dow Chemical and Union Carbide merged, making Dow the largest chemical company in the world. Dow was quick to assume Union Carbide's assets but continues to dodge their liabilities. In January 2002, Dow assumed Union Carbide's asbestos liability at a plant in Texas, and settled with workers who had been exposed to asbestos at the plant. Dow refuses to compensate the survivors of Bhopal similarly or to clean up the contaminated site. Although Dow continues to assert that the settlement reached between Union Carbide and the Indian government has resolved all claims by the victims, victims' groups point to the paltry sum provided, and the lack of attention to critical health issues associated with the disaster.

The International Coalition for Justice in Bhopal (ICJB), a coalition



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of survivors and activists, has been working for justice in Bhopal since the 1984 disaster. In addition to working towards a number of goals related to disaster relief and for the proper cleanup of the abandoned factory, ICBJ is fighting to have Dow Chemical stand trial in

Bhopal in place of its absconding subsidiary, Union Carbide. One of the coalition's goals is to compel Dow Chemical to pay just compensation to all of the gas victims, past and present. Many of these victims have continued to struggle against injury and illness for over 18 years with inadequate compensation, a lack of medical monitoring, and insufficient medical information on the chemical composition of the gas and its effects.

Another of ICJB's larger goals is to force Dow to pay for the cleanup of the contaminated Union Carbide factory site in Bhopal. This would include removal and safe disposal of the thousands of tons of toxins within the site and for the cleanup of surrounding property, groundwater, and local drinking water supplies, all of which have become contaminated by chemicals leaking from the factory. Cleaning up the factory and surrounding areas is just the first step that Dow needs to take in a process that should provide for ongoing research and monitoring, and adequate long-term medical care for those suffering illnesses from the residual contamination.

### **Michigan student group joins the fight for justice in Bhopal**

University of Michigan students and community members formed Justice for Bhopal, a local affiliate of ICJB, in Sept. 2002. The group adopted the International Coalition's mission to hold Dow Chemical accountable for their responsibilities in Bhopal. Justice for Bhopal members know that the U-M community is in a unique position to persuade Dow Chemical to clean up its act because of close ties between the two institutions. Dow Chemical and the University

have a "strong partnership... not only in financial support but also in research initiatives" (Press Release: U-M News and Information Services, 2000). Dow Chemical significantly affects the University, through direct contributions, endowed professorships, administrative ties, support of various research programs, and the funding of several buildings on campus.

Justice for Bhopal has worked both on and off campus to pressure Dow to accept responsibility in Bhopal. Students and activists from Greenpeace visited the house of former Dow President and CEO, Michael Parker, on the 18th anniversary of the disaster this past December. The students explained their concerns and asked Mr. Parker to meet with survivors in Bhopal. Mr. Parker listened, but again claimed that Dow Chemical has no responsibility in Bhopal, and declined to meet with survivors in Bhopal.

At U-M, Justice for Bhopal has built a coalition of their own, including environmental, social justice and Indian student organizations. The coalition and individual petitioners are asking the University of Michigan to publicly call on Dow Corporation to clean up the abandoned Union Carbide site in Bhopal and the contamination in the Tittabawassee River floodplain. They are also asking the University to decline financial contributions that exceed the dollar amount of cleanup efforts to date. Thus far, Dow has not spent money toward cleanup of either of these two sites.

Rebecca Meuninck is a part of the Ecology Center's Environmental Health Project and a member of Justice for Bhopal.

## **Student Conference to Highlight Dow Concerns**

Environmentalists in Michigan and around the world are continuing to challenge the Goliath of the chemical industry. The campaigns for the cleanup of the Michigan dioxin contamination and of the abandoned Union Carbide site in Bhopal are just two of the many efforts to reform a company and a larger industry that has not been responsive enough to the general public's interest in cleaner technologies and products. On April 5, activists working to hold Dow Chemical accountable for its effects on the environment and public health will converge with students and concerned community members for a conference on corporate accountability: "Indecent Acts - Demanding Corporate Accountability: A Conference on Dow Chemical and Organizing Skills." Five student organizations at U-M and four national, regional, and local environmental groups, including the Ecology Center, are co-sponsoring this conference.

The conference will look at Dow Chemical as an example of the kind of problematic behavior towards the environment and public health that plagues the chemical industry. Keynote speaker, Sheldon Rampton, editor of PR Watch and author of "Toxic Sludge is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies, and the Public Relations Industry," will talk about how corporations use experts and the public relations industry to manipulate information and mislead the public. Conference attendees will also learn about Dow's global impact on the environment and health, as well as learning valuable organizing skills. To find out more about the conference please visit the conference web page - [www.umich.edu/~enact/conference.html](http://www.umich.edu/~enact/conference.html), or contact Rebecca Meuninck at [rebecca@ecocenter.org](mailto:rebecca@ecocenter.org).