



INTER-COMPANY AND OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

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TO: W. F. Gabel

FROM: N. M. Blackman

{ Dept.
Branch
Division
Company

LOCATED AT: LEOMINSTER, MA

SUBJECT: NEWS ARTICLE

DATE: March 2, 1981

Attached for your information.

N M Blackman
N. M. Blackman

NMB/cah

Attachment

cc: M. W. Kline
H. R. Jepsen
G. D. Bevis
W. T. Gerson
W. B. Barton
✓ H. Rosenzweig
J. Isler, Jr.

Jersey Hooker Plant Struck Over Importing of Toxic Gas

By DONALD JANSON

Special to The New York Times

BURLINGTON, N.J., Feb. 27 — All 351 members of a union local have struck a Hooker Chemical and Plastics Corporation plant here after learning that the company had brought a highly toxic gas, nitric oxide, into the plant without consulting the union.

"They snuck it in," said William Boyea, who was among those picketing today at the plant, on the Delaware River. "They're trying to kill us. They have ignored a request for safety and health protections."

The workers — members of Local 482 of the United Glass and Ceramic Workers Union — began their wildcat walkout Monday night, after they learned about the delivery of the gas. They also charged that, in the last five years, 11 employees exposed to toxic vinyl chloride at the plant had suffered heart attacks or contracted cancer.

During a news conference at the plant today, Robert A. Katherine, a Hooker vice president and general manager here, said the plant's medical staff had investigated the 11 cases and found that "no causal connection could be drawn between these health problems and the work exposure."

Dr. Mitchell Zavon, the corporate medical director for Hooker, which has 70 plants around the country, flew here from the company's headquarters in Niagara Falls, N.Y. At the press conference, he affirmed Mr. Katherine's statement.

Yesterday, the union here notified the company that its members would not return to work until Hooker promised no disciplinary action for the walkout and agreed to discuss the health concerns.

Refuses to Grant 'Amnesty'

However, Mr. Katherine said there would be no such "amnesty" for an "illegal strike" and that the union should have asked for a meeting on health concerns before striking. The union's contract, with a no-strike clause, is effective until October.

Mr. Katherine said 30 cylinders of nitric oxide were brought to the plant recently to be used to stop "runaway reactions" in plastic-making vats.

"Injection of nitric oxide stops any runaway chemical reaction so no vinyl chloride will be emitted into the atmosphere," he said.

When chemical reactions in the vats get out of hand now, he said, vinyl chloride is vented into the air.

He said the Environmental Protection Agency had ordered Hooker to change that system.

Dr. Zavon said vinyl chloride was carcinogenic.

Andrew Sinkleris, a chemical compounder who mixes chemicals to make vinyl sheeting, said on the picket line that the union had "a responsibility to the community" to alert it to this venting. In addition, he said, workers must know about any dangers of the nitric oxide system that is being substituted.

Mr. Katherine said the nitric oxide system had been used safely at other plants.

But Robert Hammell, another picketer, said it was being stored next to the vats, which he said could heat up to 200 degrees Fahrenheit and might cause the nitric oxide cylinders to explode, releasing the highly toxic gas.

He said workers learned that the nitric oxide had been brought into the plant not from the company but from deliverers for the contractor that will operate the system.

Lack of Controls Alleged

Mr. Hammell said workers then found labels with skull and crossbones warning them that the cylinders, which were the size of railroad box cars, contained "poisonous compressed gas" that "may be fatal if inhaled."

Mr. Katherine said Hooker intended to train the workers in how to handle and use the nitric oxide later, when the company was ready to start using the system.

The workers said that was not good enough.

"They are totally ignoring any safety control here whatsoever," Mr. Boyea maintained. "And they are downplaying the number of job-related deaths even though they have settled some of the cases out of court."

At the news conference, Hooker executives said there had been 11 heart attacks among workers in the last five years and that two medical cases had been settled out of court.

Robert Fine, director of Engineering and Maintenance and Environmental Safety for the plant, said in an interview that doctors for the union had recently asked for and been given a list of the chemicals and pigments employees worked with.

Company Cited Last April

Richard Engler, associate director of the Philadelphia area Project on Occupational Safety and Health, which helps unions identify and control on-the-job safety and health problems, said later that the information was being used to look into causes for deaths and illnesses of Hooker workers.

He said, and Mr. Fine confirmed, that the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration last April cited



The New York Times / Dan Miller

Striking workers huddling around a union leader yesterday outside the Hooker Chemical and Plastics plant in Burlington, N.J.

Hooker for exposing workers here to excessive levels of vinyl chloride in the air in the plant over a period of years. Mr. Fine said that had since been corrected. Workers in the vat rooms wear respirators.

Mr. Katherine said that at first the walkout shut down the plant, but that sal-

aried personnel, including salesmen and researchers, had since taken over the union's work and the plant was operating at 50 percent of capacity.

He said secretaries and others would be permitted to join in this work next, "and we will be close to 100 percent in a couple of weeks."