

Thor Chemicals is being cleaned up but ex-workers' struggle continues

By: Musa Chamane

In the 80s and 90s the Thor Chemicals plant situated in Cato Ridge 30 KM outside Durban committed a very costly environmental crime by poisoning workers who subsequently died as a result of mercury poisoning. Thor Chemicals moved its mercury incinerator plant from the UK in the mid-70, the company then began importing chemicals to the Cato Ridge facility. The Plant had a licence from government to toxic waste such as mercury into the country to be processed at the site. This has been the biggest mercury deposits globally and calls for clean-up were ignored by both plant and government.

South Africa had weak environmental legislation when this plant arrived into the country in the 70's, all seemed well until a couple of workers showed the signs of being unhealthy and when they were hospitalised it was found that the mercury poisoning was the cause of their ill health. Urine tests were conducted on the workers and 32 out of 36 workers tested positive and it was found that the 32 had very high levels of mercury in their blood stream. The facility was adamant that they were not responsible for the poisoning and the mercury levels in their workers, the facility insisted that they were below World Health Organisation (WHO) standards, until the Davies Commission which was pronounced by President Nelson Mandela just after 1994. The report was handed in 1997 amongst other things the commission found that the worker's health was not taken into account while they were dealing with such dangerous chemicals. As a result, a number of workers died and some paralysed due to chemical exposure.

The impacts of mercury on human health includes blurred vision, tremors, brain damage, coma even death and it is classified as "neurotoxin" meaning it affects the nervous system which could lead to brain malfunction. Even today ex workers including families of the victims are still crying foul and they often complain that the democratic government has not done environmental and workers justice when it comes to this facility. The last community meeting was convened by groundWork at Cato Ridge Hotel in 2019. The ex-workers, community people and leaders were part of the meeting.

The meeting agreed that they will go to 2019 African Ministerial Committee on Environment meeting (AMCEN) held in Durban which they did and they spoke with the South African Minister of Environment about Thor. Fast-forward few months the minister visited the site and confirmed that the clean-up will take place. It was not the first Minister of Environment to visit the site and make promises and we thought to ourselves it's all just a political game. As civil society and communities we kept pushing and we have even requested to be heard in parliament about this issue.

groundWork together with Carte Blanche did samples through Talbot laboratories to Mngcweni River that stretches 2 kilometres from Thor chemical and it's the tributary to Duzi river leading to Inanda Dam. High levels of mercury were found in ex workers hair in 2020 as well as on the river bed. Communities shared with us that their livestock's were at some point not allowed to drink from the river since it was poisoned and others even shared with us that they lost their livestock due to poisoning. The community wanted the plant to relocate and make sure that clean-up and remediation occurs. Government has been pushed and advised by groundWork for decades in making sure that the clean-up does take place.

The Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment must be commended by making sure that the clean-up is being conducted. The department started the clean-up in April 2021 hopefully to be completed by June 2022. They have reported to have shipped half of the mercury waste to Switzerland for treatment. This is a huge victory for the community of Cato Ridge. The remediation will be the start of the long term remediation of the Thor site, and eventually, we hope, result in Thor Chemicals' legacy waste not contaminating the local people's environment

The plight of uncompensated ex workers is not known yet; the workers want justice for being poisoned as well as compensation. The Department of Labour has been approached in the past and attempts to resolve this were fruitless. The Environmental Portfolio committee in the national assembly has invited groundwork together with Thor communities to present the case on the 11 December 2021, while on the other hand the Department of Labour portfolio committee show no interest to hear the plight of the workers. We however hope that the Portfolio Committee on Labour will invite ex workers to present their case because this is a huge injustice which needs redress

In a meeting that took place on Wednesday 10 November 2021 in Cato Ridge about 130 people attended including the ex-workers and children of ex-workers representing their parents who are now deceased due to Thor Chemicals poisoning. The stories that were shared caused me to drop few tears. And listening to those stories it became clear that the workers and their families were still in pain and yearning for justice which to date is yet to prevail. They requested that we escalate the workers struggle and invite both labour and environmental affairs departments to come and explain to the community as to what should happen to resolve their plight. The community leaders in the area made commitment that they will resolve the issue of the workers with the support of groundWork. The meeting also agreed that the environmental affairs has to come to the ground and explain to them how the clean-up is going and what is planned with the contaminated site. The workers feel that they are being undermined because money from headquarters of Thor has been made available and allocated for the clean-up but not workers' compensation. They vowed that they will work the issue of compensation until it is resolved. "Aluta Continua"

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