

Accidents will happen?

Chemical accidents and the environment

Workers Solidarity Movement

1994

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Accidents rarely happen. They are caused. It is equally the case that workers end up taking more than their fair share of blame when things do go wrong. Such has been the case with a host of rail and air accidents over the years, where drivers and pilots have quickly been targeted by the media. But when management is to blame, as is the case with just as accidents, the same light of media exposure rarely shines as brightly or for as long. It's not difficult to see why.

Accidents for which management are responsible, often reveal glaring inadequacies in how management operates and in its organizational ability. The reason being that accidents rarely just happen “out of the blue.” Most often, major industrial accidents are accompanied, in the period leading up to them, a period of months or often years, by a host of smaller accidents — less serious in nature — but, with similar underlying causes. Spotting these underlying causes is the key to effective accident prevention and often it is through safety reviews or through the efforts of the workers involved that problems are picked up.

Conflict

The big accidents occur because management either ignores or deprioritises the advice it is given by those who review the smaller accidents, either because of cost reasons or, simply, because of a conflict in interest — i.e. production might have to be shutdown temporarily.

In the Hickson case, it is known that an explosion occurred in a waste treatment facility in 1989. At that time the company was operating under the name of Angus Fine Chemicals. The explosion in 1989, though small, had important similarities with the recent major accident. For instance one finding then was that changes were being made, to speed up waste treatment, but without a proper understanding of what those changes involved. Sound familiar? Maybe, but the lessons weren't learned or perhaps implemented.

One might ask then, quite rightly, how can such practices continue? But they do. In fact, they are quite common; Hickson being no exception this case.

Natural

The mainstream media rarely highlight this particular aspect of accidents. The most important reason being that they, like any other businesses support, first and foremost, the “right to manage”. According to this “right” business bosses everywhere can only function by having the unquestioned right to order people around. management give orders: workers carry them out. This is regarded as the “natural order” — by the media as much as by anyone else. It is viewed as the only way that things can work — or, to put it another way, the only way that money can be made.

But what is so “natural” about this way of doing things — particularly when major accidents result! Absolutely nothing is the answer. What is really being defended is the right of management to operate in a non- democratic way. For safety to be properly protected in any industrial enterprise, workers — who often see the problems first hand — would have to have a real say in management decisions and what priorities should be.

But such an idea is treated as poison by bosses everywhere, in newspapers and television as much as in the chemical industry.

Anarchists argue that this is a crucial issue. The chemical industry is one particularly good example of it. It isn't the technology of making chemicals – drugs etc. – that is so much the problem, as the way it is organised. Right now it is organised in a non-democratic, hierarchial way. And, not surprisingly, the interests of workers and residents are second fiddle to those of the real powerbrokers – the shareholders. But such a way of organising things is not set in stone. It can be changed.

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