

Toxic Chemicals

More than 75,000 chemicals, metals and minerals are currently used in industry. Modern civilization depends on them. Almost everything we eat, drink, wear, walk on, use or even touch was produced using one or more of these materials.

Many are hazardous, even when the final products of the plants using them are safe. Vinyl plastic, for example, poses few risks. But the vinyl chloride gas used to make it causes liver cancer. Chromium is essential to stainless steel. But chromium compounds leaching out of hazardous waste sites are suspected carcinogens. We once saw toxic chemicals only as a threat to the workers using them. But it is essential to look at the entire life cycle of a chemical, from its manufacture, to storage, use and ultimate disposal. Every year, billions of pounds of toxic chemicals are released into U.S. and Canadian air and water. Working class communities are hit especially hard, with industrial workers exposed both inside and outside the plant.

Most of these releases take place slowly, as a normal and routine part of a company's operation. But the potential for a sudden catastrophic accident also exists. The 1984 tragedy in Bhopal, India, which took more than 2,500 lives, occurred when a single tank released 30 tons of methyl isocyanate to the air. In 1988, an explosion at the PEPCON rocket oxidizer plant in Nevada killed two, injured 350, and caused millions of dollars of damage to the surrounding community. The jobs of the 64 members of USWA Local Union 4856 working in the plant also vanished in the explosion. Even more terrible accidents occurred in 1989 and 1990, when explosions in two petrochemical plants outside Houston killed 40 workers.

Many toxic materials are dumped on land. While disposal practices are safer now than in the past, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that 29,000 chemical waste sites in the United States alone pose a potential threat to their neighbors. As many as a million underground storage tanks in North America may be leaking gasoline and other chemicals into the soil and groundwater. And many chemicals are virtually indestructible; putting them in landfills only relocates the problem. Despite all our recent laws and regulations, toxic chemicals are increasing in our environment.