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Company pleads guilty, profits came first

Hicksons chemical spill

Kevin Doyle

1994

HICKSON PHARMACHEM, the company at the centre of last year's explosion and fire in Ringaskiddy, Co. Cork, pleaded guilty in July to three charges of negligence and improper handling of hazardous chemical substances. The result of this negligence was a major industrial accident in the harbour area of Cork, which very nearly caused a major contamination and deaths.

As a result of the guilty pleas the company was fined a total of £2,250, a sum which can only be regarded as peanuts. The prosecution brought by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) effectively brings to an end the three enquiries initiated by the government and Cork County Council on foot of the August 1993 explosion.

A number of recommendations may also be made to Hickson but, it was confirmed to Workers Solidarity by the HSA, these are confidential – “the public need not necessarily be informed”. This scandalous situations comes after the admission by Hickson that

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it proceeded with changes to its manufacturing process in Cork without fully testing the degree of danger involved.

This is despite the fact that they had ample evidence at their disposal that they were dealing with chemicals which were heat sensitive and probably dangerous. The trial also revealed that Hickson management had not completed a key safety audit of its manufacturing process, despite having over one year to do so. The reasons given for this were “it had... not... happened”.

The core issue was Hickson’s quest for profits over and above those already being made (see Workers Solidarity no.41). It was this that motivated the excessive changes in manufacturing which led to an otherwise safe process being turned into a time bomb.

But it must be said that it was never likely Hickson would be taken to task for this crime, given that a central plank of government economic policy hinges on “providing a stable and supportive environment for business to make money in”.

For workers at the Hickson plant the central problem remains. A number of them who spoke to Workers Solidarity confirmed that little has changed since the accident. “Management”, as one put it, “have learned nothing”. This will come as no surprise to many, but for workers and residents in the harbour area it bodes ill.

The limited prosecution of Hickson and the paltry fines imposes underline, more than anything else, that responsibility for health & safety cannot be left in the hands of the state. Effective action will require an organisation linking workers in the industry with the many residents’ associations. Such an organisation can be built. Now, more than ever, is the time.