Workers Solidarity Movement
What happened at Hicksons?
Explosion in Cork Harbour
1994

Retrieved on 15th November 2021 from struggle.ws
Published in *Workers Solidarity* No. 41 — Spring 1994.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

What happened at Hicksons?

Explosion in Cork Harbour

Workers Solidarity Movement

1994

Contents

mation that is coming to light. Or even, whether the public will be informed of what its' findings or recomendations are. Rumours of criminal proceedings against Hickson have been mooted, but even this outcome is unlikely to deal with the basis of what went on at Hickson : that profits took precedence over health and safety, on an ongoing basis. And, not just the health and safety of Hickson workers but also that of nearby residents.

More than anything else this points to need for workers and residents in the Cork Harbour area to organise. And, most importantly, to organise together. The Goverment with its' vested interest in promoting Ireland as a "grand place" to make money in, will be anxious to avoid too much scrutiny of what went on at Hickson. But as such an outcome cannot safisfy either workers or residents. As the Hickson explosion makes clear, next time, and it's inevitable there will be a next time in the current climate, we all may not be so lucky.

The explosion and fire at the Hickson chemical plant in Ringaskiddy, Cork, last August, has gone down as one of the most serious industrial accidents in Ireland to date. Though no fatalities resulted, it is now clear that this outcome was only a matter of luck. One worker, the first to notice that something was wrong, left the site of the explosion minutes before it blew up. And the explosion itself, occured shortly before shifts were due to change on that morning of August 6th.

Just as serious, for a period of time, a number of chemicals — carbon disulphide and the cancer causing dimethyl sulphate — were in danger of being drawn into the fire which swept the production facility and, had this occured, there is no doubt that a much more serious accident, affecting nearby residential areas, would have been the result.

As it was, the fire was contained but in fighting it, further problems arose:

> Water pressure failed during a crucial stage of the fire fight either because supply was insufficient (the council's responsibility) or because on site water valves were poorly maintained (Hickson's responsibility).
>
> Storage space for chemically contaminated water, used to fight the fire, was insufficient. As a result, Hickson, with Council approval had to drain the contaminated water, untreated, into the nearby harbour.

RULED OUT

In the aftermath of the accident there were numerous calls for a public inquiry by people living in the area. But such an inquiry, though obvious to most, was "ruled out" almost immediately by the Minister for Environmental Protection, John

Browne. According to Browne the Cork County Council, the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) would be investigating the accident and their reports, in due course, would be made "public". Though, it later emerged, contrary to popular understanding, that the EPA had little or no power to enforce anything — no mater what its' findings might be.

Hickson themselves played their cards close to their chest by announcing their own inquiry. Though, in advance of anything this might uncover, they were confident enough to predict that they would be back in full production in the not too distant future — once the plant was rebuilt.

But what of the accident and what might have caused it? Though considerable attention focused on the environmental damage resulting from the explosion and fire, precious little attention went to this crucial question — even though it was here that lives, very nearly, were lost.

Now, with the release in December of Hickson's own report into the accident, it is becoming clearer that considerations of profit played a major part in what happened.

DIDN'T UNDERSTAND

The accident itself occured in an area where a solvent or used in the manufacturing process was recovered for reuse. Though the chemicals involved (part of the well known anti-ulcer drug, Zantac) were in production since 1986, this recycling process was developed and implemented only in 1991 as part of a programme to improve the profitability of the process. What now seems clear is that Hickson's management didn't understand the full dangers of what was being undertaken. Nor, for that matter, given the considerable information they had available to them, in relation to hazards they were working with, did they exercise reasonable caution. Rather,

it seems, they marched ahead, anxious to improve the profit margins above all else.

But, if this wasn't bad enough, it now seems as if bad management practices (see adjoining article) played an equally important role:

Hickson's safety review of their production process, known as a"HAZOP" was not completed at the time of the accident. A "HAZOP" is normally undertaken to pick up hazards or potential hazards, in a manufacturing process. Usually, it is completed before or soon after production commences.

In two years Hickson hadn't managed to complete the review.

Supervisory staff in the area where the accident occured, were not technically qualified to understand the chemical changes that were being implemented to "improve" the process. Qualified staff were removed from the area where the accident eventually happened in 1990, in order to cut wage costs and once again, improve the profitability of the venture.

At the time of the accident the particular production facility involved was only partially shut down for annual maintenance work. As a result, all equipment had not been cleaned out thoroughly. The accident, it is now known, occured precisely because this regime was in operation. Partial shut downs are widely regarded as an unsafe practice, particularly in a chemical plant. But such shutdowns are often engaged in so that necessary equipment maintance can be done without production targets being unduly hindered.

NEXT TIME

The Health and Safety Authority will be the final body to report on the accident, on the Governments behalf. Its report is due out in early February. But it is not clear, even now, to what extent the HSA will highlight or even act on the infor-