

'Govt, make Thor pay'

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The Witness



ABOVE: Some former Thor Chemicals employees who attending the meeting at the Cato Ridge Hotel yesterday to discuss the way forward. RIGHT: S'celimpilo Phungula holding his father's death certificate. His father apparently died from chest complications from working at Thor Chemicals. (NOKUTHULA NTULI)

The South African government must force Thor Chemicals to compensate its former workers and take its imported toxic waste away from Cato Ridge.

This was the resolution from Cato Ridge communities and former Thor employees who gathered on Wednesday to discuss a strategy to deal with the British chemical giant, whose local plant has allegedly claimed dozens of lives in the past three decades.

The plant is said to house more than 3 000 tons of mercury waste that was exported from the United Kingdom in the 1980s.

The meeting, which was facilitated by groundWork at the request of the local ANC alliance, was apparently prompted by the August fire at the Thor plant.

Those in attendance were suspicious of the cause of the inferno as it was shortly preceded by an inspection of the Minister of Forestry and Fisheries and Environmental Affairs, Barbara Creecy. She reportedly described Thor's conduct as "a scandal and gross irresponsibility", saying the company should foot the bill of more than R300 million to treat the waste before it could be safely disposed.

"More importantly community people say that ongoing failure of environmental monitoring of the site as well as failure to inform communities on what is planned and what happened during the day of the fire is their biggest concern," said groundWork's Bobby Peak.

On Wednesday, former Thor employees told the gathering about how the company bought them orange juice, milk and citric soda to try and mitigate the impact of toxic exposure but it never helped.

Most of them said they still suffered from the side effects from their time with Thor. These include nausea, bleeding gums, cramps as well as chronic chest and kidney infections.

The group blamed government for dragging its feet in dealing with Thor, even after the 1995 Davis commission of inquiry into Thor Chemicals and the mercury waste recommended that the company pay compensation to the workers and be forced to find ways to treat mercury or take it elsewhere.

"We were hopeful when we went to give evidence to the commission because we thought that the government was finally doing something to deal with the problem but its recommendations were never implemented," said Tinto Summerton.

A civil lawsuit in the UK compelled Thor to settle some workers' claims — with some getting about R600 000 each — but the majority of the workers who attended Wednesday's meeting felt that justice had not yet been done because they never got any compensation.

Children of former Thor staffers who are said to have died from complications of working at the factory also spoke of their grief.

One of them, S'celimpilo Phungula, said his grandmother told him that both his father and his uncle had died from unexplained chest complications after years of working at Thor.

"It was really hard growing up and we are not out of the woods yet because I don't even have money to go to tertiary. My father was the breadwinner so when he died in 2004, we were rendered poor," said the 21-year-old.



S'celimpilo Phungula holding his father' death certificate who apparently died from chest complications from working at Thor Chemicals.

Cattle owners told The Witness about how their herds were depleting due to drinking water contaminated by the run-off from the Thor facility and the dams around the plant.

“I think even the soil has been contaminated and I’m sure one of these days we will find out that the vegetables that we are planting in our gardens are actually poisoning us,” said Nombulelo Ndlovu.

Community activist Vincent Mkhize said the government should have done more to hold Thor accountable because it knew about the dangers of the mercury but it was just too happy to take tax from the company yet did nothing to protect its people and the environment.

The community was also not pleased that relevant authorities such as the Green Scorpions, the Department of Waste and Sanitation and eThekweni Metro had not attended the meeting even though they were apparently invited.

“This is a disgrace because communities require answers from these responsible government stakeholders who are not willing to come to the party,” said groundWork’s Musa Chamane.

The meeting resolved to try and engage the government departments over the next three months but threatened to take the fight to Parliament if their call for Thor to compensate former workers and take away the mercury was not heeded.

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