

## **Poisoned RCA Workers Demand Justice And Peace**

For over twenty years, the US-based multinational Radio Company of America (RCA) had been pouring toxic wastewater into a well in its Taoyuan, Taiwan facility. Then, in the early 1990s, it packed up and run like so many other globalizing capitalists, leaving behind permanently contaminated soil and underground water. Even more ghastly is the following. During these twenty-some years, the company has been feeding its workers this contaminated water, which, the workers firmly believe, is the reason behind thousands of cancer deaths and acute illness suffered by former RCA employees.

Three decades ago, when foreign investment swarmed into the booming Taiwan economy, the number one US appliance manufacturer RCA set up a plant in Taoyuan to take advantage of the cheap local labor. The plant was closed in 1992, just before the majority of workers were becoming eligible for retirement. The plant had hired as many as 20 to 30 thousand workers, and it was credited by the Taiwan government as a model for export firms. The company was later acquired by high-tech firms such as General Electric and the Thomson multimedia, Inc. It now has plants in 45 countries, employing over 55 thousand workers, and its products are sold all over the world.

The horrendous pollution problem of the plant was not revealed until 1994, when former workers stepped forward to blow the whistle. Investigation by the Taiwan Environmental Protection Administration confirmed that the RCA had been dumping organic solvents into a secret well and caused permanent contamination to the soil and underground water surrounding the plant site. Dangerous level of trichloroethylene and tetrachloroethylene can be found in underground water drawn as far as two kilometers away from the site. The level exceeds safe drinking water standard 1000 folds. Moreover, by and by, over a thousand sacked employees were found to develop deadly cancer at liver, lung, rectum, stomach, bone, nasopharynx, lymph, and breasts, and various kinds of tumors.

Under the pressure from Taiwan EPA, in 1996, RCA conducted an investigation to its Taiwan plant site, and later allotted NT\$ 200 million (US\$ 6 million) for a soil and water clean-up. However, even formers employees are dying of cancer en masse every year, there have been no sign of any compensation or even remorse from RCA. The old workers are now angrily saying: “ We are valued less than the dirt!”

From the capitalists’ perspective, people are indeed less valuable than the soil. The land can be sold and developed at a profit. In the case of RCA’s Taoyuan plant, the parent company Thomson successfully had the plot rezoned, and sold it as commercial land at a price of NT\$ 1.6 billion (US\$ 533 million)! Consequently, all investigation and remedial efforts of the

pollution case have been made on the highly profitable land, not people.

Ironically, RCA is now styling itself as an environmentally friendly company and a protector of the earth's natural resources. It even implements recycling projects on its products and uses recycled material as much as possible. Yet what we see in Taiwan is that, for the sake of profit, the multinational evaded its responsibility of wastewater treatment, and made the workers touch, inhale and even drink deadly carcinogens day in and day out for decades.

The Self-Help Association of Former RCA Employees was founded in 1998. Up to now, the committee has collected 1375 cancer cases, 216 cancer deaths, and 102 cases of various tumors among its members. The committee is now working to connect national and international labor, environmental and human rights groups, and occupational health doctors and lawyers in a campaign to get just compensation from the murderous company. Yet going to court in Taiwan is especially difficult for workers. Occupational hazard laws in Taiwan require impossibly high degree of provable causal relations between the illness of workers and culpability of the employer. Furthermore, the court requires huge trial fee and "safe deposit" for any trial involving monetary compensation. In this case, it can amount to more than NT\$ 30 million (US\$ 900 thousand)! The Taiwan government had a special commission in its cabinet to deal with the RCA case, but it was dissolved last year. The government is apparently reluctant to take on powerful multinationals like RCA on behalf of its citizens.

The RCA incidence is not an isolated case. This kind of corporate crime can happen, and are indeed happening throughout the world when corporate when corporations roam the world searching ever-cheaper workers in more vulnerable countries, use them up and throw them away. Whether the company looks like downright sweatshop or with a high-tech gleam is beside the point. As long as corporations can freely exploit workers anywhere without any consideration for basic human decency, we are all victims.

**We ask that RCA and the US government take this issue seriously. RCA should talk to the former employees face to face, and deal with the necessary compensation .We hope that the US government, at the same time, will use its authority to help encourage RCA to make a proper resolution of this issue.**

Self-help Association for RCA Employees Taiwan Association for Victims of Occupational Injuries( TAVOI) TEL: 886.2.23212198 □ FAX: 886.2.23211764 Email: <a href="mailto:occupaku@ms15.hinet.net">occupaku@ms15.hinet.net</a> 5F-1, No.140, Chin Shan S. Rd., Sec.2 Taipei, Taiwan
--