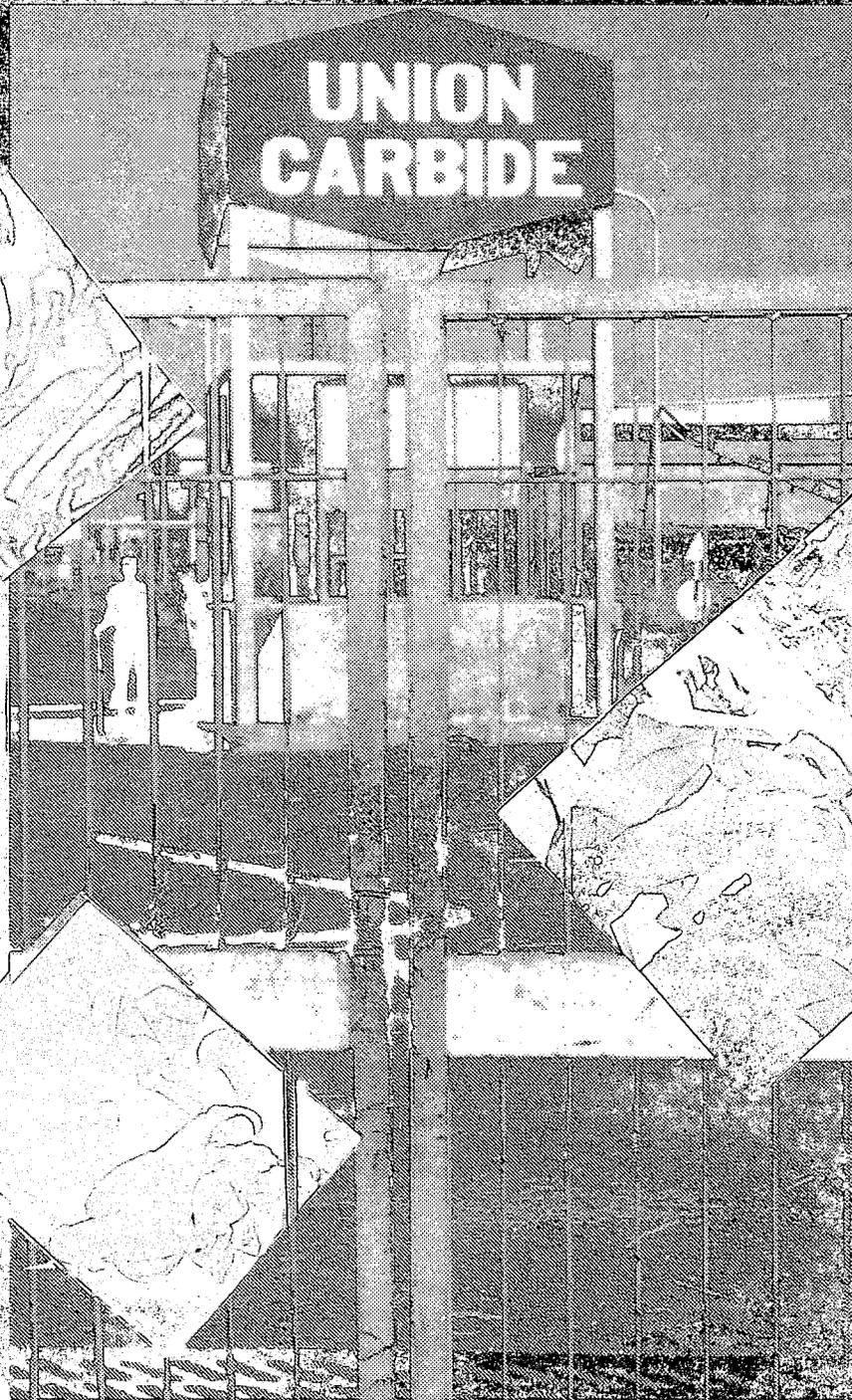


# Capitalism's Great Peacetime Massacre



The toll at Bhopal, India, has now reached the staggering figure of at least 3,000 people killed. Over 150,000 have been treated in local hospitals. According to *Der Spiegel*, probably 20,000 will suffer permanent blindness. Forty percent of the dead are under the age of ten years old.

The incident is being called "the worst industrial accident in all history," "a chemical Hiroshima"--indeed, it could well be one of capitalism's largest single peacetime slaughters.

Like Hiroshima, the deed was done almost as quickly as it began...and also like Hiroshima, its ravages will be felt for years to come. The carnage began early in the morning of Monday, December 3rd, when workers at the local Union Carbide plant were unable to control the pressure building up in a tank of chemical methyl isocyanate. Within an hour the toxic gas had spread far into the shantytowns of Bhopal, a city of one million. The alarm was spread by cries of agony, or sometimes by the simple sound of living beings falling over dead where they stood. People tried to flee--but no one knew where or how. A wrong turn in the night could mean instant blindness--more than a few were killed as they groped for their way and were struck by cars and trucks, whose drivers were sometimes blinded as well. The plant siren didn't sound until two hours after the leak began--some residents, mistaking it for a fire alarm, raced towards the factory...and right into the toxic gas. Almost two weeks later, the government announcement that the plant was going to be restarted sent hundreds of thousands fleeing the city.

Methyl isocyanate is used in pesticides and works by attacking the nervous system; on humans, the first signs of contact are often severe damage to the cornea of the eye and constriction of the nasal and bronchial passages. The resulting spasms killed many of the victims in India. Others literally drowned in secretions from their lungs, stimulated by contact with the methyl isocyanate. A Union Carbide spokesman assured that only a few people would suffer permanent effects and that "for most of the victims...the physical effects will prob-

ably disappear in time..." Sure--a lifetime. A number of experts have stated that at a minimum any contact with the chemical means higher susceptibility to lung infections--already a severe problem among the poor in India--as well as sterility and even mental retardation among children. Doctors in Bhopal have already cited an alarming rise in the number of viral pneumonia cases coming into the hospitals. Moreover, the Union Carbide statement is a calculated lie--the spokesman knows almost nothing at all about the long-range effects of MIC, because the company has not even studied the effects of the chemical on humans. They have no antidotes, nor even any real treatment. Nor were there any preparations made for an emergency like Bhopal. All too often medical personnel had nothing to give the victims staggering into hospitals except sedatives and pain-killers.

### The Cover Up

As proof that the Bhopal disaster was purely an accident, Union Carbide spokesmen argued that it might have happened anywhere, even in the U.S. since, as company Chairman Warren Anderson explained, "Our safety standards in the U.S. are identical to those in India or Brazil or some place else. Same equipment, same design, same everything." This too was a calculated, cynical lie--there are differences in almost every major part of the safety systems--yet the press, and particularly the U.S. press, repeated Anderson's words as if they were chiseled in stone. *Time* magazine, for instance, reported that the two safety devices to either scrub clean or burn off excess MIC operated *automatically* just like Union Carbide's American plant--*days after* it was widely known that in India the devices had to be operated manually. Similarly, the Indian plant was equipped with only a one-stage manual warning system--a siren--whereas the U.S. plant had a four-stage computerised system. A Union Carbide spokesman explained that the Indians didn't have the spare parts to keep the computerised system running. They have what they need to run the profit-making equipment, but safety equipment--that, naturally, is a different matter.



This patronising chauvinism and casual indifference to the slaughter they wreaked was just a taste of what was to come. Why was a dangerous plant like this operating amidst such a population centre? Why you know how *these people* are, replied company spokesmen, there's just this "tendency in India for people to gravitate toward any centre of commercial activity." There was hardly anyone in the neighborhood when the plant was built, the spokesmen went on, but afterwards these "squatters" settled in and the company just didn't have the heart to force them to move. In fact, the plant was never in a deserted area, located only one kilometre from the city's railroad station (which was the scene of the most intense carnage) and thus close to historic concentrations of proletarians. It was for such advantages that the site was chosen in the first place--not least of which was accessibility to a large pool of some of the cheapest labour on earth. Union Carbide pays day labourers hired at the plant gate a hefty *one dollar per day*.

### The Warnings

One moderate local politician, M.N. Buch, had the temerity to challenge the site as the plant was being constructed, citing an Indian law requiring factories producing dangerous substances to be constructed not less than 15 miles from population centres. Mr. Buch lost his post. It is worth noting that every single company requesting an exemption from this law has received it.

The history of the Bhopal plant is a

history of a disaster just waiting to happen:

- Dec. 24, 1978: a huge fire in the plant's naptha-storage area envelops the city in a cloud of black smoke.

- Dec. 26, 1981: a worker named Ashraf dies from a leak of phosgene gas (used to make methyl isocyanate) inside the plant. The company claims he removed his gas mask during a leak.

- Jan. 10, 1982: another phosgene leak leaves 24 people severely ill, including a number of local residents.

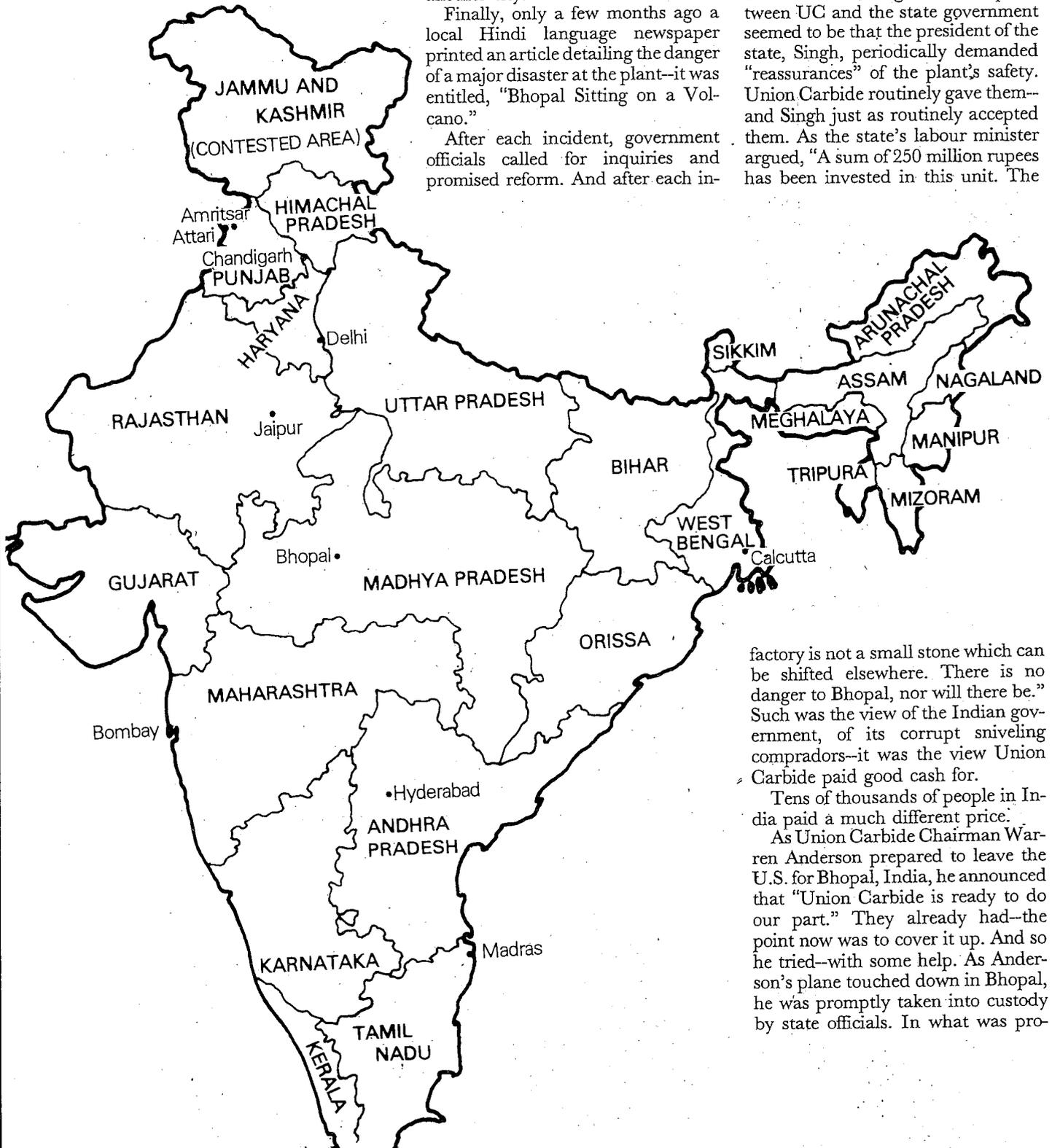
- Oct. 5, 1982: a pipe breaks, leaking gas into the neighboring shantytowns. What is described as a "mini-riot" breaks out.

- In 1983, there are two more minor leaks; in January 1984 another worker dies of chemical exposure. His family is "persuaded" to move to another city.

Finally, only a few months ago a local Hindi language newspaper printed an article detailing the danger of a major disaster at the plant—it was entitled, "Bhopal Sitting on a Volcano."

After each incident, government officials called for inquiries and promised reform. And after each in-

cident, nothing changed. In part this was due to the company's well-lubricated relations with the local government. Union Carbide's Public Relations director was a nephew of the state's former education minister. The plant's lawyer is a well-known local official of the Congress (I) Party. Another high-level job is held by the brother-in-law of the deputy chief secretary of the state government. Part of the working relationship between UC and the state government seemed to be that the president of the state, Singh, periodically demanded "reassurances" of the plant's safety. Union Carbide routinely gave them—and Singh just as routinely accepted them. As the state's labour minister argued, "A sum of 250 million rupees has been invested in this unit. The



factory is not a small stone which can be shifted elsewhere. There is no danger to Bhopal, nor will there be." Such was the view of the Indian government, of its corrupt sniveling compradors—it was the view Union Carbide paid good cash for.

Tens of thousands of people in India paid a much different price.

As Union Carbide Chairman Warren Anderson prepared to leave the U.S. for Bhopal, India, he announced that "Union Carbide is ready to do our part." They already had—the point now was to cover it up. And so he tried—with some help. As Anderson's plane touched down in Bhopal, he was promptly taken into custody by state officials. In what was pro-

claimed to be a "tough show of Indian sovereignty," they charged Anderson with several crimes. This orchestrated piece was deflated though when it came out that Anderson had been "jailed" in the plush Union Carbide guesthouse, that he had been surrounded by 50 armed guards for his own protection, and that Rajiv Gandhi himself had personally intervened to ensure Anderson's well-being and timely release. Anderson plunked down 2000 dollars bail and walked out. He was advised to leave India "at the earliest" because his presence "might provoke strong passion against him." The Western media hailed Anderson's trip as a brave display of concern. It was a show designed to protect the bloody hands of both Anderson and the local officials who have for years rested in complicity with Union Carbide.

### A Deadly Logic

In response to the mounting evidence of the massive cutting of corners at the Indian plant, and of the web of corruption surrounding the operation. Union Carbide spokesmen have still insisted that "it's not as if there was anything unusual about this plant." True enough--Union Carbide is hardly some fly-by-night maverick running an operation greatly inferior to those of the industry as a whole. It is one of the largest chemical companies in the world, with plants in 38 countries, and its Bhopal operation was not only relatively modern (built seven years ago) but Union Carbide is also the largest American industrial complex in all of India, with 13 plants there. "Unusual"?--in a sense, no: its corruption and bribing of the local compradors, extending into the very top of the government itself; its construction of a plant using deadly chemicals in the midst of a population centre; its neglect of the most elementary safety precautions for both the workers and the local populace while it routinely doled out assurances of safety; and its wretched attempts now to wipe its hands clean by shelling out a pittance of its huge profits--these are the typical methods of capital, which in the oppressed nations take on especially sinister features.

Union Carbide came to India in

the first place as part of the expansion of Western capital in the years of the Green Revolution--a time when capital was turning over the traditional agrarian relations of the country and finding new ways to squeeze the life-blood of the labouring people. Union Carbide complains of people thronging into its environs, yet its fertiliser plants have been a key part of the process of transforming land relations, driving peasants off the land and into the city slums, where they in turn form a section of proletarians even more readily exploitable by capitalists like Union Carbide. Profit-saving methods like cutting safety measures are not then the atypical practices of a corrupt few, but an integral part of this whole logic. It is the same logic that leads Union Carbide to pay its day labourers a dollar a day, the logic that means that agricultural workers in the fields of the oppressed nations never cease working while pesticides rain down on their heads, leading, according to the World Resources Institute, to ten thousand deaths every year--and these are only the ones that are counted. Whatever the specific setting may be, from the famine-stricken lands of Africa to "cities of death" like pollution-enveloped Cubatao in Brazil, where birth-deformed babies are almost as common as normal ones, for imperialism these environments constitute priceless and unforfeitable opportunities to accumulate--always murderously at the expense of the people. In a fundamental sense the Bhopal death machine did just what it was supposed to--and as such it is a more extreme example of countless others just like it ticking away particularly in these countries. Another exploded a month earlier in Mexico City in killing flames--it too was rooted in the particular twisted development of that country--and who knows where the next slaughter shall erupt tomorrow. The thousands of corpses in India and the tens of thousands who will suffer for the rest of their lives are the special product of these methods. And it is precisely men like Chairman Warren Anderson who head them up: men who stride into the mayhem they have caused and imperiously demand the price for beginning anew.

Many commentators have observed

that potential Bhopals threaten the inhabitants of every country. "Bhopal was a modern parable of the risks and rewards originally engendered by the Industrial Revolution: Frankenstein's wonder becoming Frankenstein's monster...industrialised society has created a shared fragility." Not even in the developed countries have their "wonders" ever really been anything but "monsters shared" only by the oppressed, as, for example, the thousands of inhabitants of Seveso, Italy, where in 1976 poisonous dioxin was spewed over the city and numerous children were scarred by chloracne. But it is undeniable that the dangers of Bhopals are distributed as lopsidedly as capital itself. One analyst for the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development coldly demonstrated how safety is related to profits: since it costs only one-hundredth as much to indemnify victims as is spent on safety equipment each year, it is generally more profitable for corporations to pay off casualties than prevent them. And when the killing costs less? A typical airplane fatality in the U.S. is indemnified at \$300,000 per fatality; in Spain, similar recent fatalities were paid off at \$70,000 apiece; the word from Wall Street is that Bhopal fatalities may go for no more than \$25,000 each. As for the old imperialist adage that "life is cheap in the East," it is apparent here just who it is that sets the price. Chairman Anderson returned to the U.S. from India and informed the corporate world that, "I am confident that the victims can be fairly and equitably compensated without a material, adverse effect on the financial condition of Union Carbide." After his trip to India and to the city which was reported to look like nothing so much as a scene following a blast from a neutron bomb, with the plant intact and corpses everywhere, Anderson solemnly proclaimed that, "I don't feel there was anything left to be desired regarding safety." Some journalists reported that when he was arrested, Anderson was visibly upset at being treated like a common criminal. He need not worry--men like Warren Anderson are far from common criminals, nor will they be treated as such. ■