



New Trade Union Initiative

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Justice for Hindustan Unilever Workers and their Families in Kodaikanal
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Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL) is a majority controlled subsidiary of Unilever, an Anglo-Dutch multi-national corporation, that owns many of the world's consumer product brands in foods, beverages, cleaning agents and personal care products. On its website that HUL states that its "CSR philosophy is embedded in its commitment to all stakeholders - consumers, employees, the environment and the society that the organisation operates in." And "HUL sites will progressively help communities, wherever required, to develop watersheds." Further the "company recognises its joint responsibility with the Government and the Public to protect environment and is committed to regulate all its activities so as to follow best practicable means for minimising adverse environmental impact arising out of its operations" and "management at all levels, jointly with employees, is responsible and will be held accountable for company's environmental performance."

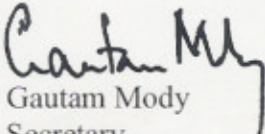
Yet contrary to its stated CSR philosophy and environmental policy, in its 18 years of operation before it was shut down by the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board in 2001, HUL's thermometer producing factory in Kodaikanal released tons of mercury waste into its surrounding sensitive watershed forests and lakes. The nearby community was also exposed to dangerously high levels of toxic mercury vapours emitted from the plant.

Exposure to the neurotoxin mercury is dangerous for the developing foetus and young children, and it can damage the brain, heart, kidney, and liver. The government of Unilever's home country and other OECD countries have already banned the production and trade of mercury-containing products. In face of declining use for mercury in developed countries, corporate greed forced a shift in mercury trade toward developing countries. With no regulatory mechanism on mercury import India has emerged as one of the leading users of mercury. Despite a request from the people of Kodaikanal, Unilever has not taken steps to ensure that the mercury recovered from this waste is permanently retired from commerce.

Contrary to HUL's safety policy that it "recognises its responsibility to ensure safety and protection of health of its employees, contractors and visitors in all its operating sites", workers were not warned of the hazards of working with mercury, nor were they given protective gear. Ex-workers and their families continue to suffer from multiple medical problems. At least 19 workers have died till date. Faced with the inability to work and massive medical expenses, several workers and their families are confronting destitution. The company refuses to come to the aid of those poisoned by it, and is delaying clean up to international standards.

NTUI along with its affiliate, the All India Council of Unilever Union demands that Unilever:

- Bear the financial costs of workers and their families' medical expenses, compensation for workers' inability to work due to debilitating illness, and environmental clean-up including remediation of the soil around the plant and safe dismantling of the plant and its machinery.
- Ensure that these are done in compliance with public authority and under public scrutiny, observing highest standards of transparency and accountability.


Gautam Mody
Secretary

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