

Geneva, 24 June 2020

Mr. Narendra Modi
Prime Minister of India
Prime Minister's Office
South Block, Raisina Hill, New Delhi-110011
India

By e-mail pmo@gov.nic.in

IndustriALL Global Union warns Indian Government to take swift measures to prevent another Bhopal Disaster

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing this letter to you as General Secretary of [IndustriALL Global Union](http://www.industriall-union.org), representing more than fifty million workers in the manufacturing, mining and energy sectors, in more than 140 countries worldwide, including in India, to express our concern regarding the safety of Indian manufacturing facilities, particularly, but not exclusively, in the chemical industries.

Recently, India has experienced a rash of accidents in its chemical sector. A partial list includes a toxic gas leak at LG Polymers at Vishakapatnam, fire at a pharmaceutical packaging factory in Maharashtra, two accidents in Gujarat due to a boiler explosion and a fire. More recent accidents include a boiler explosion in a Lucknow chemical factory, and a fire in an Agro industry site near Vadodara. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

The terrifying reality is that this cluster of serious accidents could easily indicate a pattern of failure, with even more accidents likely to follow. When this kind of a systemic breakdown in safety controls is observed, the possibility of a major catastrophe on the scale of the 1984 Bhopal disaster, cannot be ruled out.

Government, politicians, entrepreneurs, employers and managers in India must heed these warning signs.

It has been said that one occurrence can be an accident; twice could be a coincidence; but three or more is a trend or a pattern. India's chemical industry is demonstrating a trend or a pattern of hazardous fatal occurrences. Workers have been injured and killed. In all of these cases there is at least the possibility that workers and residents of nearby communities have been exposed to toxic chemicals that will cause health issues in the months or years to come. The accidents should be properly investigated to uncover all of the causes, and exposed workers and other people should be monitored for health effects for life by medical and epidemiological experts.

The most hazardous moments in any chemical plant are start-ups and shut-downs. When the process is up and running, it is usually less hazardous.

If the sudden rash of accidents is not a monstrous coincidence, then there must be a thread tying them together. We believe that the following questions need to be fairly asked:

- Were these plants shut down in haste, when the COVID-19 lockdown was imposed on 24th March 2020?
- Have they been sitting idle, without proper maintenance, for weeks?
- Are factory owners trying to re-start them now with inadequate levels of qualified staff?
- Are trained, educated, and experienced employees available?
- Are working conditions creating new problems, such as attempts to maintain social-distancing in a plant where the work environment makes this difficult or impossible?

The type of failures we see in India right now fall under the category of Process Safety Management (PSM) failures. PSM was developed after the lessons from several major accidents, including the Bhopal disaster, showed that such events can be difficult to analyse and prevent using traditional occupational health and safety approaches. Serious unplanned events of this scale are beyond the control of individual workers. Preventing such events means ensuring that all aspects of safety are at their best. Materials, tools, equipment, the work environment, job and task procedures, and people (both management and workers) must create a system of multiple layers of prevention, with little opportunities for failure.

The broad concepts of PSM consists of twelve elements, including areas such as management accountability, capital project design, process equipment integrity, and human factors. A key element that may have played a part in this outbreak of chemical sector accidents, is “management of change”.

A thorough review of what has changed should have taken place. The COVID-19 pandemic has invalidated the usual operating procedures. A pre-start-up inspection of idled equipment and a comprehensive review of the situation should have attempted to identify all of the potential points of failure that could have resulted from the shutdown of the plant. Then, a strategy and procedures should have been identified to deal with these variances from usual conditions.

Finally, a start could be attempted – ensuring that sufficient qualified staff were on hand; not only to perform the start-up but to respond to any emergency that could arise.

Equally troubling, a culture of secrecy seems to have infested the Indian chemical industry since the Bhopal event, when for a short period of time there was a promise of greater openness and transparency by the industry.

All of this is made even more dangerous by the pre-existing trend to de-regulate the industry and scale back on workplace inspections by government safety officers.

IndustriALL Global Union calls for an urgent review of the adequacy of existing safety regulation, inspection and enforcement. In addition, we call for an immediate review of Process Safety Management principles, and whether they are well integrated into India’s legislative and regulatory framework.

We insist that there be a public consultation on India’s capacity to respond to major industrial accidents. This must all be conducted in full transparency with the participation of trade union representatives.

The Bhopal disaster resulted in thousands of dead and injured. Many of the injured continue to suffer, to this day. No effort can be spared to prevent a replay. This is a wake-up call.

IndustriALL Global Union, together with its affiliates in India and elsewhere in the world, are really concerned with all these happenings. We consider that this is a historical responsibility

to warn the Indian Government to take all the measures to prevent any potential accident in the chemical sector. Please know that our global union is ready to work with your Government, employers, and all relevant stakeholders for the high benefit of workers and society at large.

I anticipate your swift action and response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sanches". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial letter.

Valter Sanches
General Secretary

CC:
Permanent Representative of India vis-à-vis the United Nations
IndustriALL Global Union's Indian affiliated trade unions