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USA :

Environmentalists and Labor Unite to Protest Chevron Disaster

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One year after a massive explosion and fire at the Chevron oil refinery in Richmond, California, there was a demonstration of thousands directed against the oil giant on August 3. A significant aspect of the action was that it brought together environmentalists from the Bay Area and nationally, and activists from the Richmond community. From the environmentalists' side, the demonstration was part of a wave of "Summer Heat" actions organized by 350.org. ("350" refers to the estimate of 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that scientists say is the upper limit to avoid severe greenhouse heating.)

Richmond is predominately non-white. Latinos make up 39 percent of the population, and another 27 percent are African American and other people of color. For years, people in the Richmond community have been battling the environmental racism of Chevron, the major industrial plant in the city, and many other chemical and other polluting industries, whose wanton spewing of toxins disproportionately affects the areas where non-whites live.

The fire and explosion at Chevron last year brought this truth home to hundreds of thousands throughout the Bay Area. The catastrophe happened as a result of deliberate negligence (cost cutting) on the company's part that resulted in a ruptured pipeline. Workers, who rushed to the leak in response to this emergency noticed a plume of volatile hydrocarbon gas visible as a shimmering in the air, knew that an explosion was imminent and fled the scene in the nick of time. The resulting explosion and subsequent fire spewed a huge cloud of toxic black smoke for hours across Richmond and neighboring cities, visible for miles and miles. In spite of a timely order by city authorities for people to stay indoors, some 15,000 were hospitalized with respiratory problems in the following days.

The coalition that organized the demonstration, a two-mile march that ended with a rally at the refinery, included 350.org and its local supporters and a range of community groups, including the Richmond Progressive Alliance. There were banners and signs reflecting local community issues with the Chevron refinery, as well as those of the national "Summer Heat" protests: "No more toxic hazards, no Keystone XL pipeline, no refining tar sands or fracked crude – yes to a just transition from fossil fuels to union jobs and clean energy!"

It also included Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin of the Green Party and other city officials. 350.org national leader Bill McKibben flew in for the action. He noted that Richmond was the only stop on the "Summer Heat" tour where he received a red-carpet treatment from City Hall. At the end of the rally McKibben and about 200 others staged a civil disobedience sit-in on Chevron property.

Speaking at the rally, McKibben said, "The reason that we're here is that Chevron is a really bad actor. In places where they get their oil, they're a bad actor. Ask the people in Canada fighting their fracking. Ask the people of Ecuador who have had to live with their waste. When they get it here to refine it, they're a bad actor. They sent 15,000 of their neighbors to the hospital. And they are bad, bad actors on this planet. They have nine billion barrels of oil in their reserves," which, if burned will have a severe effect on climate change.

McKibben also applauded that there was a labor contingent on the march, which included unionized nurses, government workers, longshoremen (warfies), teachers, and communication workers, as well as representatives from Walmart workers seeking to organize. The local coalition appointed an organizer to do labor outreach. Included among the demands of the demonstrators was one supporting better safety standards for the Chevron refinery workers.

Veteran labor activists Steve Early and Suzanne Gordon wrote, "The speakers reflected growing diversity in the local

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environmental movement. Native-Americans led off, followed by African-Americans, Laotian, and Latino critics of “climate chaos.” Andres Soto of Communities for a Better Environment said, “We know that we’re the little guys and that they’re the big and powerful multinational corporation – in fact an international criminal cartel...They have the money power; we have the people power. And as long as we continue to organize, continue to bring people out, we know that Chevron ultimately is going to have to deal with us, because we can’t allow them to control our lives here in Richmond.”

Thousands joined together to protest on the anniversary of the disaster.

Health care workers Estelle Schneider told of effects of the fire a year earlier. “The fire affected primarily people who are older, younger, have chronic diseases or have issues like asthma. So people whose immune system is weaker were greatly affected. But, in general, it affected everybody. We saw people come in with difficulty breathing, with a lot of coughing. We saw people whose asthma was exacerbated and who had to get emergency treatment. We saw a lot of kids with respiratory problems. And we saw skin issues.”

Retired Richmond teacher and RPA activist Eduardo Martinez said that the school where he taught students with breathing problems had formed an after-school group known as the “asthma club” because they couldn’t participate in regular sports activity. Asthma and cancer rates are much higher than normal in Richmond’s toxic ally downwind from the refinery and chemical plants.

The day before the demonstration, the City of Richmond filed a lawsuit against Chevron, citing “a continuation of years of neglect, lax oversight and corporate indifference to necessary safety inspection and repairs.” After last year’s fire, the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration cited Chevron for eleven “willful” safety violations and imposed the largest fine in the agency’s history, \$1 million that the company is contesting.

As Early and Gordon note, Chevron just posted second quarter profits of \$3.37 billion. \$1 million, or \$0.001 billion, is part of the rounding off of these profits. Two days after the demonstration, Chevron pleaded no contest to six criminal charges related to the fire and agreed to additional oversight over the next few years and pay \$2 million in fines as part of a plea deal with state and county prosecutors.

No actual people responsible were fined or will face jail.

Mayor McLaughlin replied the next day, “The thought of Chevron thinking that \$2 million is going to be sufficient in terms of addressing the problems, the ongoing threat that they cause to my community, is outrageous. Our city council owes it to the residents of Richmond to pursue this lawsuit, demanding accountability from Chevron.” McLaughlin also noted that it was “really great on Saturday to join with our allies all over the Bay Area and California coming to Richmond and really making it clear the community of Richmond does not deserve and will not stand for these kinds of toxic releases that impact our health and safety and also impact the sustainability of our planet.”

She also pointed to the support to the demonstration from the government of Ecuador, which is waging its own battle with Chevron for the truly horrendous environmental disaster it wrought in that country. Leading up to the demonstration, Ecuador bought ads in the local newspapers, saying the people of Ecuador stand with the people of Richmond. “So we had the spirit of people all over the world with us, and 2,500 people marching and rallying in from of the gates of Chevron. And we will definitely will be continuing this momentum, because so much is at stake, and we’re not backing down.”