

## **Second ex-Samancor worker to be buried in two weeks**

**This Saturday, January 15<sup>th</sup> retrenched Samancor workers in the Vaal will bury yet another of their comrades. The workers believe they are dying of manganese poisoning and since 2000 at least 50 of the retrenched workers have died.**

### **What is the SRWCC?**

The Samancor Retrenched Workers' Crisis Committee (SRWCC) is an affiliate of the Anti-Privatization Forum that came into being in 2003. The primary objective of the SRWCC is to secure compensation from our former employer, Samancor Ltd., for damages done to our health. Our members worked at Samancor's Metalloys plant in Meyerton, Gauteng, where mined manganese ore is converted into its purest form, electrolytic manganese. The SRWCC believes that the manganese dust to which Samancor workers are exposed has caused irrevocable damage to our health; many retrenched Samancor workers are presently suffering and dying from illnesses and symptoms, which suggest manganese poisoning.

Our group is comprised of roughly 300 ex-workers and is based in the township of Sebokeng, where our weekly meetings consistently draw crowds of 100-120 people. Whilst the majority of SRWCC's membership consists of former Samancor employees, it also includes the widows and other relatives of deceased workers. Our incomes are often required to support large households including extended family members. Thus, our loss in wages has been felt throughout the community.

### **Paying with our lives...**

**Since 2000, 50 of our members have died.** We are convinced that many of these deaths were caused by the conditions under which we worked while at Samancor. We have collected the death certificates of deceased workers, and have kept records of the cause of their deaths. Although we cannot afford private health care or expensive diagnostic tests, we believe that many of our comrades died from illnesses related to over-exposure of air-borne manganese.

During our employment with Samancor, the company kept detailed medical reports of our manganese exposure. Every six months we had to submit urine and hair samples, along with fingernail clippings; chest x-rays were also taken at this time. Thus, the company maintained very accurate records of our health conditions; there is a very real possibility that this knowledge was used to cull out the sickest among us. Samancor is obviously keenly aware of the occupational hazards to which its workers are exposed.

Why should we be kept in the dark about our level of exposure to manganese when the company kept such a meticulous documentation? We have a right to know the result of tests that were conducted on us by the company's physicians. Hence, our members have completed over 200 personally signed letters requesting the release of medical records (including x-ray results) from the company. We attempted to deliver these to the company's head office last December, but they refused to accept them. We will now hand-deliver them to the factory in Meyerton.

The manganese dust we inhaled while working at Samancor is responsible for our illnesses and deaths. We know this even if the company denies it, and even if the government doctors deny this. We know it because we see our fellow comrades die around us all the time; we witness each others' coughing attacks, shortness of breath, dizzy spells, mood swings, memory loss, and joint pain. We will not rest until Samancor acknowledges its accountability for our ill health.

## Understanding the Dangers of Manganese

[<http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxprofiles/phs151.html>]; <http://www.lenntech.com/Periodic-chart-elements/Mn-en.html>]

Manganese is a grey-white, chemically-reactive heavy metal. It is used in the production of batteries, in dietary supplements, and as ingredients in some ceramics, pesticides, and fertilizers. However, its principal value is derived from its role in steel production. Although manganese is required for the proper functioning of the human body, over-exposure to this heavy metal is potentially deadly. Every person is exposed to small amounts of manganese in the food and water they eat and drink and in the air they breathe; under normal circumstances, the body controls these amounts so that neither too little nor too much is present. However, manganese may endanger a person's health if he/she is exposed to it in excessive amounts, which the body is unable to safely absorb.

A person is most likely to be exposed to higher-than-usual levels of manganese or manganese-containing chemicals if he/she works in a factory where manganese metal is produced from manganese ores or where manganese compounds are used to make steel or other products. The main source of exposure is through breathing in manganese dust. Because of the dangers associated with over-exposure to manganese, limits have been set to protect workers' health. **The internationally accepted limit for air-born manganese is 0.2 mg/m<sup>3</sup>, however, the South African government's limit is 5 mg/m<sup>3</sup> -- that is 25 times higher than the international standard!!** Whilst plant workers are the most susceptible to over-exposure, the communities located next to Samancor are also likely being exposed to higher-than-usual levels of manganese dust in the air.

When a person breathes air containing manganese dust, many of the smaller dust particles become trapped in his/her lungs. Some of the manganese in these small particles may then dissolve in the lungs and be transported through the blood to the liver, the kidneys, the pancreas and the endocrine (hormonal) glands. Larger particles and those that do not dissolve will be coughed up, in a sticky layer of mucus, out of the lungs and into the throat, where they will be swallowed and will enter the stomach. Many factors determine whether or not a person's physical health will be harmed, including dosage, duration, and form of exposure. Age, sex, diet, family traits, lifestyle, and state of health must also be considered.

## What is Manganese Poisoning?

Manganese miners or steel workers exposed to high levels of manganese dust in air may have mental and emotional disturbances, and their body movements may become slow and clumsy. This combination of symptoms is a disease called '**manganism.**' Workers do not usually develop symptoms of manganism unless they have been exposed to manganese for many months or years. Manganism occurs because too much manganese injures a part of the brain that helps control body movements. Some of the symptoms of manganism may improve upon certain medical treatments, but the improvements are usually temporary, and the brain injury is permanent. Manganism has been reported most often in miners. It has only been reported a few times in other workers exposed to the metal, such as steel workers.

Long-term exposure to manganese at work may also lead to **Chronic Manganese poisoning**. Although quite serious, the effects of this poisoning are less severe than full-blown manganism. Chronic Manganese poisoning occurs due to the prolonged inhalation of manganese dust and fumes. The central nervous system (brain and spine) is the main site of damage from chronic manganese poisoning, and may be permanently damaged. One of the most serious indications of manganese poisoning is **Parkinson's disease** (which causes a person's hands to shake and tremble). Manganese can also affect a person's respiratory tract (lungs and breathing); a high incidence of pneumonia and other upper respiratory infections has been found in workers exposed to dust or fume of Manganese compounds.

## SRWCC's Experience with South Africa's Labour Movement

Although we were members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) for many years before our retrenchment, SRWCC members are very disappointed with the lack of solidarity we have received from our former union. When workers were retrenched NUMSA did not even put up a fight. In order to express our dissatisfaction, we held a demonstration outside of NUMSA's National Congress in September 2004.

Here is a list of items we think organized labour must address:

- Why have unions abandoned demands like a moratorium on retrenchments, especially when there is more than 40% unemployment in the country?
- Is it not important that the unity between the employed and the unemployed be maintained?
- Can the organisational experience and skill of these ex-union members not be put to use in the struggle for social and economic justice?

- Does the trade union movement not continue to have a responsibility to these workers once they lose their jobs?
- Why don't trade unions take the issues of worker health and environmental welfare more seriously?

## **Fair Compensation**

Samancor has retrenched hundreds of workers since 1999. Some of us won respectable settlements from the company, while others received very little. The SRWCC believes that even cases of higher payout Samancor do not sufficiently compensated workers for the loss of their health. Many older members of the SRWCC literally gave their lives to this company.

During Apartheid, Samancor reaped enormous profits off the backs of our cheap labour. Unfortunately, in the ten years since the country's first democratic elections, socio-economic conditions of many working class South Africans has actually deteriorated due to the government's implementation of strict neo-liberal macroeconomic reform. In this age of financial liberalization and labour deregulation, working people are increasingly viewed as expendable by large multi-national corporations like Samancor.

In December 1998 Samancor was de-listed from the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, and it is now jointly owned by two of the world's largest companies in the resource industry. 60 per cent is held by Melbourne-based BHP Billiton; and the other 40 per cent by Anglo American Corporation of South Africa Ltd. According to a company spokesperson, Samancor was forced to retrench hundreds of workers over the last decade due to prevailing "global market conditions".

However, from the perspective of the SRWCC, the company's economic vitality appears to be thoroughly in tact. 80% of the world's known economically mineable high-grade manganese ore reserves are located in northern South Africa, the majority of which are controlled by Samancor. Refined electrolytic manganese is used to improve the strength, toughness, stiffness, wear resistance, and hardness of steel. Samancor is the world's largest producer of electrolytic manganese, to which there are currently no known effective substitutes. Samancor's operations are highly profitable: earnings rose 16-fold last year and, as of September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2004, the company's worth was estimated between \$400 and \$850 million.

## **OUR DEMANDS...**

On two occasions in 2004, the SRWCC and our supporters marched to the Samancor's head offices in Johannesburg to deliver a memorandum explaining our concerns and detailing our demands. The company treated us with utter contempt both times, disregarding our presence. Although informed well in advance about our demonstration, they refused even to receive a piece of paper from the 300 angry people outside their offices. Clearly, our lives are of no value to this company; somehow Samancor's executives sleep soundly at night without regard for the manner in which their profits are made.

- Samancor must acknowledge our existence and stop ignoring our attempts at communication.
- We demand the company release the medical records of individuals who have submitted written requests.
- We want Samancor to take responsibility for what it has done to our health; the company must enter into sincere negotiations with us about compensation.
- We are concerned about the wellbeing of those working in the plant today.
- And we demand Samancor address the threat that its plant poses to the health of nearby communities.

For more information call Bafana 073 537 7963

