

# The campaign against Thor Chemicals

## Trade unions and the environment

*Following the discovery of mercury deposits in the Mngweni River just below the Thor Chemicals plant in Natal, the Chemical Workers' Industrial Union was one of a number of groupings that took up a campaign against Thor Chemicals as well as against the importation of toxic waste. This article, by Gareth Coleman of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU), discusses the scope and potential of trade union intervention in the struggle for the protection of the environment, outlining the campaign against Thor Chemicals to illustrate that environmental struggles have the potential to take on an overtly political character in South Africa.*

### Introduction

The recent discovery of substantial poisonous mercury deposits in the Mngweni River near Cato Ridge has revealed the seriousness with which the struggle for a healthy and safe environment in South Africa must be viewed. The discovery came soon after two other environmental scandals in Natal: the threat to the unique St.Lucia dune forest by a multinational dune mining company (Richards Bay Minerals) and the deformation of vegetable crops in the Tala Valley as a result of dangerous herbicides sprayed on the nearby sugar plantations.

In other parts of the world the question of the environment has increasingly resulted in mass action. In some countries the environmental lobby has grown into a substantial social force and an integral part of those countries' national and international politics. Given the broad appeal of environmental issues, struggles for the protection of the environment have drawn the attention of a range of social groups and organisations from some quarters of



big business, to environmental action groups, and trade unions. In South Africa, very little is known about the campaigns undertaken by trade unions in the struggle to protect the environment. One such campaign is the CWIU's struggle against Thor Chemicals. Before discussing this campaign, it is necessary to briefly discuss how the question of environmental protection has been approached internationally in the chemical industry, to reveal the scope and potential of trade union intervention in the struggle for the protection of the environment.

## International developments in the chemical industry

The nature of the chemical industry, with dangerous chemicals in the factory and high levels of pollution emitted from a number of plants, has placed chemical workers internationally in a rather unique position. Workers and trade unions in the industry have a first hand knowledge of the dangers of particular chemicals and of their possible effects on the environment and the population at large. At the same time, workers are particularly well placed to challenge existing environmental issues and controls. At a general social level, the power of trade unions acting as a pressure group has been able to force governments to legislate in favour of environmental protection. At another level, workers in production, if well organised, have challenged management's ability to treat the environment with disrespect in their attempts to cut costs.

Toxic pollutants do not respect state boundaries. What happens environmentally in one country directly affects people living in another. This fact propelled the International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers' Unions (ICEF) and its affiliates to play a more active role in the protection of the environment. ICEF identifies "the right to know" and the "right to decide" as being central to trade unions and other organisations' struggle against the destruction of the environment.

As ICEF states, "Information and control are the twin pillars upon which rests the democratic operation of society. Trade union demands for expanded industrial democracy stand on the same principles. Such demands imply and include the assertion of common ownership over the natural environment, rights which have been violated in the past by industry without discussion or consultation."

ICEF affiliates have put these resolutions into practice in the conditions of their own



countries. Some of the struggles of ICEF affiliates have begun to reveal the rich and varied form that trade union struggles for the protection of the environment can assume. Some of these are outlined below.

● In Finland, the Finnish Paperworkers' Union have negotiated a clause with companies whereby a worker can refuse to dump what he or she believes to be hazardous waste.

● In West Germany, IG Chemie-Papier-Keramik signed an accord with the German Chemical Industry Association which includes: the screening of existing and new chemical products for their environmental effects; procedures for safety analyses for plants and for the transport of hazardous substances.

● In Holland, the Industriebond FNV carried out a survey which revealed that over 75% of its members viewed environmental action as a task for trade unions. As a result of this survey, the Industriebond FNV decided to prepare an industry environment plan detailing policy for the industry as well as formulating workers' rights at the plant level.

Trade unions in other parts of the world have progressed quite considerably in addressing environmental issues. The social power of the environmental lobby, protection provided by state laws and the power and rights of the unions themselves have all contributed to this process.

In South Africa environmentalists face an uphill battle. Not only is the legislation governing the environment hopelessly inadequate, but pollution levels in some parts of the country are said to be the worst in the world. For example, in the Eastern Transvaal industrial air pollution has resulted in acid rain. In the Vaal Triangle, visibility is very bad as a result of a haze formed by the emission of hydrocarbons which react with the atmosphere.

Within the context of a highly restrictive political climate, where "the right to know" and "the right to decide" are in themselves a focal point of daily struggles, environmental struggles have the potential to take on an overtly political character. This point is well illustrated in the controversy surrounding the importation of toxic wastes to Thor Chemicals.

## **Thor Chemicals and the international toxic waste trade**

Mercury is an extremely poisonous element. It can destroy the human central nervous system and cause birth defects. The non-fatal effects of the substance include mental deterioration, nervous tremors, fits of laughing and crying, the loss of the senses of hearing, sight, smell and taste, and severe inflammation of the digestive system.

American Cyanamid, a company with a bad track record when it comes to labour issues in South Africa, and with a bad environmental record in the United States, exports at least ten tons of mercury waste to Thor Chemicals at Cato Ridge every year. The Thor plant is situated on the border of Kwazulu at the source of a stream which runs into the Mngeweni River. Two kilometers, the Mngeweni River flows through a populated area

of Kwazulu at Fredville where residents use the river on a daily basis for washing of clothes and cooking utensils, and for swimming.

Despite the fact that the Cyanamid plant is located nearby one of the five mercury smelters in the United States, it chooses to export this waste to South Africa. This is because the US recycling plants refuse to handle mercury wastes with over 3% organic carbon as the environmental consequences of burning mercury wastes heavily contaminated with organic chemicals can be severe. The wastes which are shipped to Thor in South Africa are contaminated with 30-40% organic waste!

The total shipments of waste to Thor from Europe and America are unknown as Thor executives are secretive about their operation.

## Why does Thor operate in South Africa?

The question is why did a British company such as Thor decide on South Africa to build the largest recycling plant in the world? The obvious answers which spring to mind are:

- South Africa's poor environmental protection laws;
- cheap and repressed labour;
- no established popular environmental non-governmental organisations;
- a hope that political outcry over apartheid might leave little time for environmental activities.

The laws governing the importation of toxic wastes into the country are very lax.



**Workers, environmental organisations and members of the community unite against Thor Chemicals and American Cyanamid.**

While countries must apply for permission to import waste, this is generally granted with very few questions asked. As a result, South Africa is a potential dumping ground for the world's waste products that are considered too dangerous to recycle or dispose of in their own countries. Controls in a number of advanced capitalist economies over the disposal of waste are so strict that it is cheaper to dispose of the waste in another country, usually poor, developing countries that need the revenue even at the expense of the environment.

The only non-OECD<sup>☆</sup> countries that regularly import wastes from the United States are Mexico, Brazil and South Africa. All of these wastes are targeted for so-called "recycling" facilities, which are in reality reprocessing plants that rely on highly-toxic wastes as a cheap alternative to raw materials.

In 1989, 105 countries agreed to the Basel Convention governing international shipments of waste. The document did not ban the export of waste but imposed tight restrictions. Waste could only be exported if adequate environmental precautions were taken, and if the government of the importing nation gave its approval. The Lome IV Convention, signed in December 1989, between the European community and 68 ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) states contains a ban on all shipments of waste to 45 African states. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) has also resolved to ban all waste imports into the African continent. South Africa has not been party to any of these agreements.

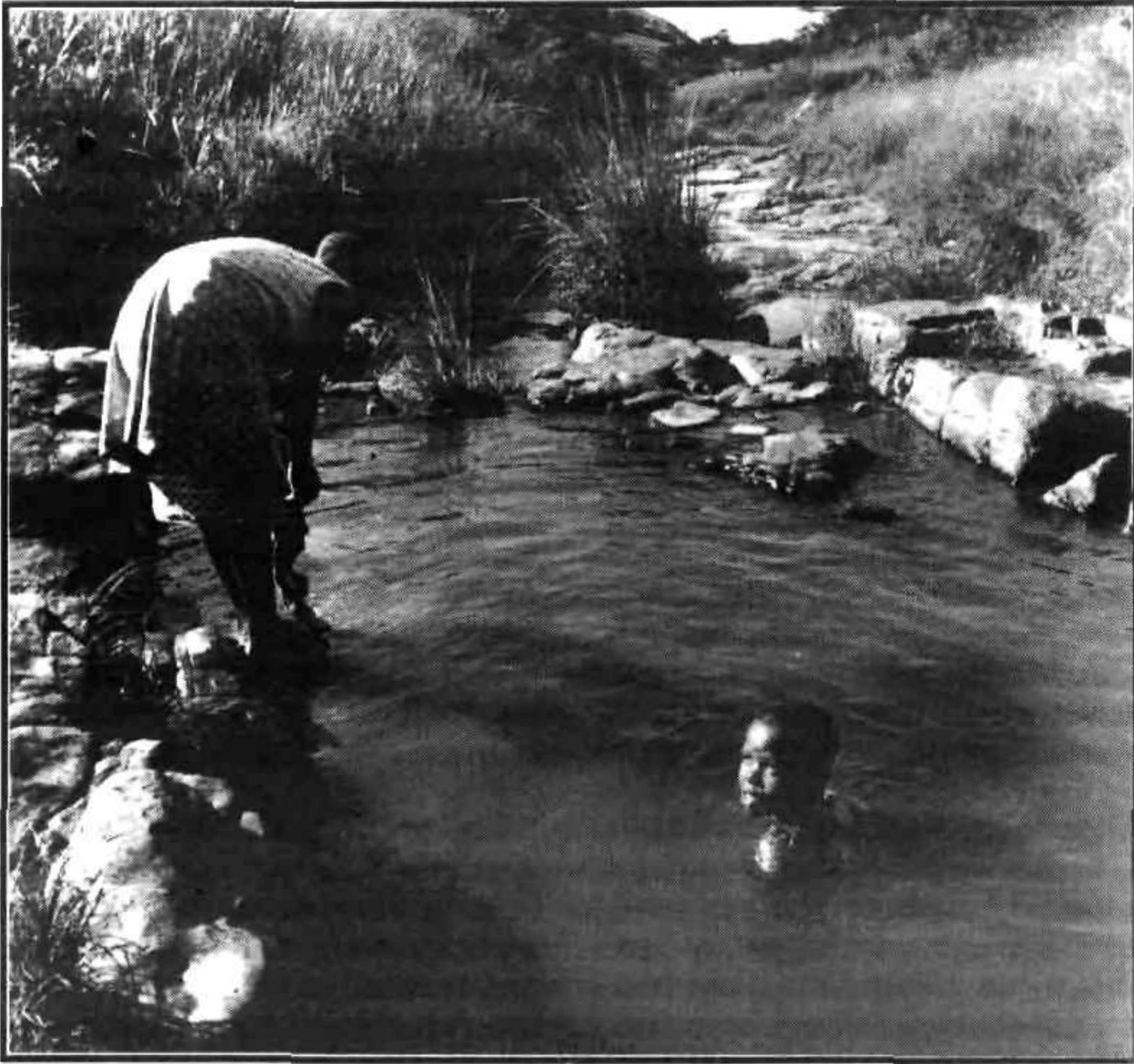
## **The campaign against Thor Chemicals**

The alarm was raised in the Natal area when three independent investigations, one by the Umgeni Water Board, another by a US newspaper, the St.Louis Post-Dispatch and a third, by the environmental group Greenpeace International, revealed alarmingly high deposits of mercury at the source of the Mngeweni River, just below Thor Chemicals. In an analysis of soil and sediment samples performed by the Queen Mary College in London, a sediment sample was found to be contaminated by 1 764 parts per million of mercury - this is 8 810 times the US standard for classifying the waste as hazardous. River sediment samples at Fredville were also well above the US standard for hazardous wastes.

When members of Earthlife Africa spoke to workers at the plant they were told that two workers had "gone mad". They were taken to hospital as they were "doing and saying strange things, and were shaking a lot". These are typical symptoms of mercury poisoning. The Managing Director at Thor said that workers did get sick but they did not "go mad". "We check the guys' urine every week and if levels exceed 200 micrograms of mercury per litre they are given orange juice to drink and taken away from the plant." (The logic behind giving orange juice is the claim that drinking large amounts of liquid

---

☆ OECD = Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development



Residents wash clothes and bathe in the Mngweni River which has the highest recorded mercury contamination in the world.

- orange juice simply tastes better than water - will flush the mercury out of the body, thereby reducing the level of mercury in the urine. In fact, all the liquid does is to dilute the urine so that the amount of mercury appears to be less, while the actual levels in the blood remain unchanged.)

Three main groupings publically took up the struggle against Thor Chemicals and the *importation of toxic wastes: the CWIU, Earthlife Africa and residents around Fredville* (the affected area). The campaign also targetted American Cyanamid in an attempt to expose the way multinationals are abusing the environment in South Africa.

Both the environmental groupings and the trade unions acted at the international level. Greenpeace mobilised support for the Earthlife Africa internationally and through



**A toxic waste storage ground in Pietermaritzburg, Natal.**

its US affiliates. The CWIU worked closely with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) and other US unions. Greenpeace did crucial investigative and research work, organising tests of samples of local soil and publishing important information regarding the companies involved and the environmental risks being taken. CWIU was also able to get access to information through its international networks regarding the international toxic waste trade, and American Cyanamid and Thor Chemicals in particular.

In April 1990, protests were organised at Thor Chemicals in Natal and Cyanamid plants in the US. Workers at Thor Chemicals had not been unionised, but CWIU nevertheless saw it as an important issue to pursue. A busload of CWIU members from Durban joined members of Earthlife Africa, Chief Mlaba, a Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (CONTRALESA) chief, and residents who lived below the Thor

Chemicals plant, in protesting outside the plant calling for an end to the toxic waste trade. The CWIU senior shop steward from Cyanamid in South Africa travelled to America with the CWIU National Organiser to join a Greenpeace and union protest outside Cyanamid in America. Ironically, the protest in Natal went off peacefully with the police keeping a low profile. However, the protest in the US was baton charged and a number of protesters arrested.

After a public outcry at the levels of pollution, the government was forced to close down this section of Thor Chemicals operations until it had rectified the situation. Subsequent to the outcry Thor have claimed that the spillage came from stolen drums containing mercury and that the problem had therefore been the result of a security breakdown. According to Thor, the problem has been solved since they increased security. (Sunday Tribune, 12 August 1990.)

With regard to the continued importation of toxic wastes to this country, the company's permit to do so must be renewed every year. The final decision lies with the Department of Health after consultation with the Water Board and other relevant government departments. The Umgeni Water Board has already stated it has no objection to the continued importation of toxic waste.

## Some conclusions

The campaign against Thor Chemicals, and most importantly against the export and importation of toxic waste did not last for an extended period of time, nor did it involve hundreds of thousands of workers or environmental activists. Furthermore, it did not lead to any immediate changes in legislation governing these issues. However, it ensured that the problems at Thor Chemicals received widespread press coverage - raising the issue of environmental abuse and the toxic waste trade internationally and in South Africa. It was also significant in that it was the first time that a trade union in South Africa embarked upon a campaign with other groups in protection of the environment. A number of issues were highlighted in this experience:

**International support:** International support and mobilisation proved crucial in this instance at the level of gaining access to information and for mobilising support and organising joint action. The nature of the issue, involving harmful trade between different countries, was particularly amenable to international support and mobilisation. As a result, multinational companies are beginning to feel a co-ordinated response to their activities.

**Raising environmental issues:** The campaign raised environmental issues as an aspect of the struggle in South Africa. The close relationship between apartheid, exploitation and the destruction of the environment was clearly exposed.



**Health and safety beyond the factory floor:** CWIU members showed a willingness to take action on an issue of health and safety that was not directly related to struggles on the shop floor. The campaign brought home the point that workers' responsibilities around health and safety struggles extend beyond a concern for their own health, to the community at large. The solidarity organised by CWIU was particularly important given that workers at Thor Chemicals were not even members of the union.

**Community, union and environmentalists alliance:** The campaign led to the development (although ad hoc and embryonic) of an important alliance between the trade union, the affected community and environmental groups both nationally and internationally. The experience of joint action bodes well for the future.

**Exposing the role of multinationals in South Africa:** The campaign at Thor clearly exposed the role of certain multinationals in South Africa. Not only do they continue to exploit our labour, but also have no respect for our environment. The issue exposed the fact that these multinationals, in search of a quick profit, regard certain countries as dumping grounds for their waste products.

**Organisational gains:** A positive sign is that workers at Thor Chemicals are showing greater interest in CWIU due to the union having shown a concern for their environment. The challenge remains to turn this into an organisational victory at Thor Chemicals and thereby to increase the effectiveness of workers in protecting themselves and their environment. □

## References

Greenpeace USA; *The Gods Must be Crazy: Mercury Wastes Dumped by Thor in South Africa*. A Greenpeace International Waste Trade Profile; 10 April 1990.

Marguerite Johnson; *Battle to Save the Planet*; Time International, No.17; 23 April 1990.

P Johnston, R Stringer & J Vallette; *Contamination of Soils and Sediments in the Vicinity of a Mercury Recovery Plant*; Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London and Greenpeace International; 11 April 1990.

ICEF; *Industrial Change and Environmental Concern*; A discussion paper for the ICEF Working Group on Environmental Policy Meeting; Brussels, 18-19 October 1989.

ICEF; *Resolution on the Global Environment*; Adopted at the 19th Statutory Congress of the ICEF, December 1988.

*The Daily News*; 10 April 1990, *Sunday Tribune*; 8 April 1990, *The Guardian*; 12 April 1990, *Business Day*; 5 June 1990.