

M. L. Verma. Age 37

(Carbide Worker Token No 4557)

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(Originally hired for alpha-naphthol plant)

I joined Union Carbide on 28 March 1977 as part of the second batch for the alpha-naphthol plant. I had six months of classroom training and no training on the job. During the on-the-job training period they used us for precommissioning and start up of the naphthol plant. I continued working in the naphthol plant but the plant was not running successfully. There were plans for large-scale modifications, for which they shut down the plant. In this period most of the operators of the naphthol plant were transferred to the formulation plant. As there was no qualified operator jobs, we worked as packers and in other labor class jobs. We came back to the naphthol plant when it restarted, but it still did not function properly. They decided to permanently close down the alpha-naphthol plant, so all the operating staff became jobless. They launched a voluntary retirement scheme and about 30 workers resigned. Those of us who remained were sent for theoretical training for the MIC plant. After training, we took exams for selection as an MIC unit Operator. I was selected.

About September 1983. I was sent to the MIC unit for on-the-job training. There they told me that I must learn about the MIC plant from my fellow workers. When the plant was running, it was difficult to take on-the-job training, but somehow I began learning about the MIC process. My demands for assistance were always refused. In this period I was asked to take charge when regular operator was absent from duty. I refused to take charge under these conditions; they had not confirmed me as a regular operator for the MIC plant. I had decided not to take charge until I after confirmation because I wanted to be sufficiently trained and I wanted the financial benefits. For these reasons, management refused to confirm me. They said there were no vacancies.

They gave me an oral warning about the job refusal but never gave it in writing since they were aware that I was not confirmed as a regular operator. However there were workers given confirmations who joined UCIL after me and who were less qualified. These persons never resisted management using them in positions for which they were not qualified. For almost a year I refused to take charge as an operator because I was not yet confirmed. Then, in November 1984, MIC plant manager S. P. Choudhry told me that if I did not follow all orders, I would be transferred to other units. I told him that I was not refusing any job for which I was confirmed. I would perform any job for which I was needed if I was trained properly and was receiving proper financial benefits. I told Choudhry that if they were to transfer me due to false charges of job refusal, I wanted it in writing so that I could proceed with a legal response.

After a few days, S. P. Choudhry took an oral test from me about the MIC plant process and said that if I passed the test I would be confirmed. I took the test and was able to give a correct reply to every question. Nonetheless, I was given a failure on the test and told I was not fit for the MIC plant. Then they told me that I would be transferred to the Sevin plant. They mentioned the transfer in their daily notes but did not give me any letter. I argued that a daily note is not sufficient for transfer purposes, or that I required a letter. Nor did they mention the transfer on the notice board.

Even though on the basis of the oral test they said that I was not capable as an MIC plant operator, they had tried months before to force me to take charge in the MIC plant unit when I was not confirmed. The transfer was S. P. Choudhry's way of taking revenge for my not obeying him in the past. Although they announced my transfer on 26 November, I continued to come to the MIC unit. I also began to personally report to the MIC plant superintendent and to the production assistant. This continued until the night of the gas leak. During the week, no action was taken against me for not reporting to the Sevin plant. I went to the MIC unit and sat there because there was no work for me.

On 2 December 1984 I was on night shift. I punched my card around 10:50 and reported to the production assistant of the MIC plant. About 11:15 P.M., I was sitting in the MIC control room along with my fellow workers. Then I went to the tea room at the 200-ton refrigeration unit. Generally, when we are free MIC operators sit in this room. The window of the tea room toward the MIC unit was open. Around 11:30, we felt MIC irritation so we came out from the room to locate the source of the leak. We saw that some water was dropping from the MIC plant structure.

Near that water the MIC was in greater concentration. As we came toward the vent gas scrubber side we felt high MIC concentration. We reported the MIC leak to production assistant S. Qurashi. The plant superintendent was also sitting there in the control room. They replied that the MIC plant is down and thus there is no chance of leak. They did not take our report seriously, saying "Koi baht nahin appan chay ke bad dhekhenge" ("Okay, no problem, we'll see after tea").

In the meantime, the tea boy came to the control room and we took tea. Then the plant superintendent went to smoke a cigarette near the security gate, as it is not allowed on the plant premises. Now the time was around 12:30. With the supervisor, we went to the MIC plant. The operator, Khampariya, was ordered to spray water on the leaking point. The supervisor was not able to trace out the source of the leak. Around 12:50 the leak became vigorous and started coming out from, the vent gas scrubber atmospheric line. I was standing in front of the control room when the siren started. After a few minutes, the plant superintendent came back to the MIC unit. As he met me, he asked, "What happened?" I told him MIC was pouring from the top of the vent gas scrubber.

Because of the siren, the emergency squad came to the MIC unit. They tried to control the leak by massive water spraying. I also helped them until the conditions in the area became unbearable. Then along with other workers I left the MIC unit area in the opposite wind direction. The MIC production assistant also fled. When the plant superintendent came back from smoking, he ordered that the loud siren be stopped. This was around 1:00 A.M. Around 2:00 A.M. when we learned that the toxic release was affecting the communities outside the plant, we argued with the plant superintendent to restart the loud siren. He refused saying it would serve no purpose, but we insisted until he switched it on again, Around 2:15, the gas leak stopped so we returned to the MIC unit and discovered that the MIC production assistant was missing. After some time, we learned that he was lying near the boundary wall. Some workers brought him to the dispensary.

Around 3:00 A.M. I saw many people from outside coming for medical help. Many were in dying condition. A managerial staff member, Roy Choudhry, and others were denying help to these people from outside. We argued with the dispensary staff, telling them that we must provide any help possible since they were affected by a leak from our factory. Finally they began to administer basic first aid. When I came to know that the area in which my family was living was also affected, I rushed home. This was around 5:00 A.M. Outside the plant, I saw how badly the gas had affected people.

I first came to know that UCC was claiming the leak had been caused by sabotage through the newspaper. First they blamed a Sikh terrorist, then a "disgruntled worker." They never mentioned any name of a worker, but gave a detailed description of one who was disgruntled due to being transferred to the Sevin plant but who remained "illegally" in the MIC unit. Immediately, I knew that they were trying to frame me, even though the description did not fully fit. I think this description came after UCC management people and lawyers interviewed ex-workers. I also gave an interview about my experiences that night. They asked me about my past history with Union Carbide so I told them about my problems regarding confirmation. Then they used this information against me to construct their sabotage theory.

Beyond UCC lies suggesting that I am to blame, there are other reasons why the sabotage theory is clearly incorrect: it is not possible for any worker to put water directly into the MIC tank, as it is a very dangerous job. Further, everyone knows that a MIC and water reaction is very dangerous, not just spoiling the contents of the tank. So, it may be sabotage that caused the leak but not by any worker. If the leak was caused by sabotage, the culprit is the management who was responsible for overseeing the safety of the MIC plant. The leak was a result of continuous negligence, unsafe handling and a poor warning system.