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Louisiana residents confront Denka Co. Ltd. at AGM over toxic air emissions

June 20, Tokyo. A US delegation traveled to Tokyo for the Denka Co. Ltd. AGM to raise concerns with company officers and shareholders about toxic emissions from Denka’s neoprene plant in St. John the Baptist Parish, Louisiana. The delegation consisted of two residents from the affected area, Robert Taylor and Lydia Gerard, as well as the Executive Director and President of the University Network for Human Rights, a US-based civil society organization.

While Mr. Taylor, Ms. Gerard, and the University Network for Human Rights were able to speak with Denka representatives outside the AGM, they were denied entry into the meeting. The delegation’s repeated requests—via email, fax, and again today in person—to schedule a meeting with Denka were also denied.

Residents told Denka representatives about the deadly consequences of toxic emissions from the Louisiana plant. “We are the ones who are suffering the effects of the Denka plant in our community,” said Ms. Gerard. “Your shareholders need to hear from us.” Ms. Gerard then unfurled a large photo of her husband Walter, who had lived in the neighborhood next to the plant his entire life before dying of kidney cancer almost exactly one year ago.

“We traveled over 6,000 miles to talk directly to Denka officers. We want to know if Denka will fulfill its human rights obligations to us as it would to Japanese citizens, or if Denka is going to treat us differently,” said Mr. Taylor, who also spoke about his family and community members suffering from cancer and other illness associated with the plant.

Denka Co. Ltd. representatives denied responsibility for the activities of Denka Performance Elastomer (DPE), the US subsidiary that owns and operates the Louisiana plant. Denka Co. Ltd. owns 70% of DPE and Mitsui Co. Ltd. owns the other 30%. Moreover, DPE President Kazuo Takahashi serves as an Executive Officer of Denka Co. Ltd.

On the evening of June 19, Denka Co. Ltd. issued its first-ever statement on this matter, defending DPE’s conduct. “If Denka isn’t responsible for the neoprene facility in Louisiana, then why did its CSR and Corporate Communications Department issue a 3-page defense of the facility just hours before its annual shareholder meeting?” said Ruhan Nagra, Executive Director of the University Network for Human Rights, noting also that Denka’s statement was a rehash of
arguments that have already been put to rest by overwhelming scientific evidence from the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Last year, the University Network for Human Rights conducted a health study of more than 500 households in the neighborhoods surrounding the Denka facility. Statistically, the cancer prevalence documented among residents living closest to the plant would almost never occur naturally. The study also found an inverse association between cancer prevalence and distance from the plant, indicating that high rates of illness among residents can be attributed to plant emissions. Residents’ longstanding suspicions about the health impact of the Denka facility are now backed by the results of the new study, which will be released in July 2019.

Predominantly Black communities in St. John the Baptist Parish, Louisiana have long suffered from high rates of cancer and other illness associated with chloroprene emissions from the neoprene plant, which DPE bought from the US corporation DuPont in November 2015. The EPA has found that the risk of developing cancer from air pollution in the area closest to the Denka facility is more than 50 times the national average. The EPA has also determined that chloroprene is a “likely human carcinogen” and that chloroprene air concentrations should not exceed 0.2 micrograms per cubic meter (0.2µg/m³). According to air samples collected by the EPA at six monitoring sites in the area of the Louisiana plant, Denka’s emissions continue to yield chloroprene air concentrations well in excess of the 0.2µg/m³ threshold.

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