Solvay Tour Reveals Union Action Results in Positive Change

USW officials toured three Illinois Solvay plants May 16-17 to view operations and check into reports of air quality issues and other safety-related matters at one of the sites.

The positive changes they saw were a direct result of union activism and solidarity to pressure local and corporate management to improve working conditions.

International Vice President Carol Landry, District 7 Sub-District 1 Director Jose Gudino, District 7 Staff Representative Frank Shubert, Solvay Global Forum member Jeff Hill and Ashlee Fitch from the USW Health, Safety & Environment department toured Solvay’s plants in Chicago Heights, Blue Island and University Park. Joining them were Solvay officials Jerry Prete, North American labor relations director, and Ron Lehman, industrial director for the Novecare North American division.

The group toured each plant’s manufacturing processes and met with local union leadership. Chicago Heights produces silica, and the Blue Island and University Park plants are part of Solvay’s Novecare line that manufactures the chemical ingredients that go into making soap and other personal care products like shampoo and body wash.

Shubert said everyone was impressed with the cleanliness and organization at each facility, and he noted that labor relations are better as well. He said the number of grievances is down at the Chicago Heights and Blue Island sites and there have been no dismissals this year to date at those locations. In contrast, there were half a dozen terminations between those two facilities last June.

Also impressive was the pride members showed in their work, Fitch said.

“Across all the worksites our members showed a lot of pride in their work,” she observed. “USW members at these facilities do more than just take pride in their work; they take actions and work collaboratively to ensure that health and safety is the priority.”

Safety Issues Addressed

Shubert said the group wanted to check out the air quality and other health and safety issues Local 2011 reported at the company’s University Park facility. Both he and Fitch said they were pleased to see the ventilation problem and other safety issues being addressed.

The constant pressure on management from the local union, International, USW Solvay council and Solvay Global Forum pushed the company to resolve the lingering health and safety issues.

Solvay repaired the plant’s roof, repainted the walls, re-did the electrical wiring, set up fans, and began installation of an exhaust and ventilation system for the production area.

“It was clean and there was no offensive chemical smell, unlike when I was there in June of 2015,” Shubert said. “I’ve seen significant improvement there. The ventilation system is supposed to be up and running in July.”

Local 2011 President Michael Spicknall said the company had talked about installing the ventilation system since 2009 when Solvay acquired the University Park plant from Rhodia Specialty Chemicals. He also said the company had discussed installing safety lockers and finished the project in time for the tour.

Spicknall credited the International, Fitch’s help, officials’ tour of the facility and the USW Solvay council for pushing the company to do what it had talked about for years.

“I really think this tour and Ashlee helping us do an information request helped expedite these projects,” he said.

Local 2011’s activism, along with support from the International and the language within the Solvay Global Framework Agreement, resulted in a better relationship with local management.

University Park management is communicating every few weeks with Spicknall and the local’s vice president to get a sense of what is happening on the shop floor.

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USW Makes Positive Difference for Solvay Workers

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“Instead of telling us what we are going to do, management is consulting with us and asking what the employees think,” Spicknall said. “Management realized it had to work on resolving issues in-house because we have an outside council to go to for help. Most of the time, what makes our lives easier makes the company more money.”

Activism Builds Member Support

Spicknall said he believes the local’s resolution of the contract and push for solutions to the health and safety issues grew the members’ support for the union.

“A lot of members have no knowledge and background with unions, but they are starting to see how some members had the union step in when things happened to them at work that were not right.”

Solvay Global Framework Agreement is More than a Piece of Paper

Some U.S. Solvay managers thought the global labor agreement their corporation signed overseas did not apply to American operations. This is changing, as the USW is holding U.S. managers accountable in adhering to the Solvay Global Framework Agreement (GFA).

When Solvay and IndustriALL, a global union federation that unites more than 50 million union members from 140 countries, renewed the GFA last February, the USW ensured it included a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the U.S.

This was especially important since Solvay acquired other chemical companies, such as Cytec, and expanded its North American presence to 57 sites—the largest segment of its operations. North American facilities accounted for 26 percent of Solvay Group sales in 2015.

Task Force Created

The MOU created a U.S. task force comprised of representatives from the USW—the USW also represents on the task force IndustriALL-affiliated unions at Solvay North American sites, Solvay corporate and U.S. management, and the Solvay Global Forum.

The task force’s mission was to gauge management and employees’ understanding of the GFA, explain its purpose and terms, and conduct annual safety reviews required under the agreement. Steve Cozzeta, head of human resources globally for Solvay’s composites global business unit, also attended the California site visits.

Solvay North American President Mike Lacey met with the task force in Houston on June 8 to discuss its development.

The next day, USW International Vice President Carol Landry, Solvay CEO Jean-Pierre Clamadieu, Solvay head of Industrial Group Relations Jean-Christophe Sciberras, Lacey, Solvay Novecare global business unit head Ron Lehman, Solvay Novecare global human resources head Allain Kasmi, and Solvay North American Labor Relations Director Gerald (continued on page 3)
Global Framework Agreement to Improve U.S. Labor Relations

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(Jerry) Prete toured two Solvay unrepresented Texas plants in Deer Park and Pasadena.

Joining them on the tour were Solvay European Works Council head and Solvay Global Forum coordinator Albert Kruft, IndustriALL Assistant General Secretary Kemal Özkan, and Global Forum members Jeff Hill (U.S. labor representative and USW Local 14200 member) and Claudenei Pecuti (Brazil labor representative).

High Road Taken

The goal of global labor agreements is to get a multinational corporation to respect and work positively with its workforce and to conduct business in a socially-responsible, sustainable manner, regardless of location.

Solvay commits itself to these practices through the GFA. It agreed to basic labor and social rights—including the right to organize—International Labor Organization social standards, and the principles of the United Nations Global Compact. Its suppliers and subcontractors also are expected to follow these standards.

The Solvay GFA tackles workplace issues like health and safety, provisions against discrimination and bullying, and a commitment to diversity and environmental protection.

The first GFA signed in 2013 created the Solvay Global Forum, which has eight union representatives from plants in the U.S., Brazil, China, France, Germany, Italy, and South Korea and three Solvay management representatives. The forum meets once a year at the corporate headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, engages in quarterly conference calls, and makes annual visits to different Solvay locations.

Solvay corporate managers share with the forum such items as the company’s financial results, investment plans, and safety records. The labor-management group also reviews the company’s Global Performance Share Plan. For 2016, U.S. Solvay employees received $775 per person for the profit-sharing plan. This is an increase from the 2015 payout of $590 per employee.

The forum also played a strong role in helping the USW resolve its labor-management issues at two Solvay Illinois plants.

The Solvay GFA is more than a piece of paper: It represents a better way to handle workplace relations, safeguard the environment, and still make a good profit that can be shared with the workers who help earn it.