An important shift is taking place in the environmental movement in the United States and, indeed, around the world. As a result of pressure by environmental activists, the governments of more than 150 countries will meet in Montreal, Canada June 29 to form an Intergovernmental Negotiation Committee to begin negotiating a binding global treaty to reduce and/or eliminate 12 toxic chemicals world-wide, including dioxins. Dioxins are supremely toxic by-products of many industrial processes, especially incineration. (See REHW #390, #391, #414.)

The new Intergovernmental Negotiation Committee will also develop criteria for adding new chemicals to the list of those to be reduced and/or eliminated. The new global treaty has the potential to change the way the chemical industry is allowed to conduct its business world-wide.

This is a critical time for grass-roots activists to become involved in watchdogging the treaty negotiations and to come to Montreal June 27-29, to bear witness and to shine a powerful light on this important international forum. For more information, contact Karen Perry of Physicians for Social Responsibility in Washington, D.C.: (202) 898-0150 (kperry@psr.org) or Monica Rohde, Center for Health, Environment and Justice (formerly CCHW): (703) 237-2249 (mrohde@essential.org); or Morag Simpson, Greenpeace Canada: (416) 597-8408 (morag.simpson@dialb.greenpeace.org.)

At a minimum, one crucial question could be decided by public pressure generated by activists: will the new treaty "reduce" or will it "eliminate" these chemicals? If the treaty calls for the "elimination" of these chemicals, the chemical industry will never be quite the same again. It would represent a triumph of the precautionary principle over the failed approach called "regulation" for protecting public health from industrial poisons. (See REHW #586.)

After a decade of work, dioxin activists --who have been considered "on the fringe" by some mainstream environmental groups in the U.S. --find themselves at the center of ground-breaking international action. As Jack Weinberg of Greenpeace once said, the power of national governments seems to be shrinking (in relation to chemical corporations), so the environmental movement is shifting from "think globally, act locally" to "act locally, act globally." International arenas are offering new opportunities to curb the power of corporations.

The chemicals to be reduced and/or eliminated by the new treaty are known as "POPs" --persistent organic pollutants. The initial list of POPs to be considered by governments negotiating the new treaty includes a dozen chemicals that can be divided into three groups:

1. **PESTICIDES** (DDT, Aldrin, Dieldrin, Endrin, Chlordane, Heptachlor, Mirex, and Toxaphene);
2. **INDUSTRIAL CHEMICALS** (polychlorinated biphenyls [PCBs] and hexachlorobenzene [HCB]);
3. **UNWANTED CHEMICAL BY-PRODUCTS OF VARIOUS INDUSTRIAL PROCESSES, ESPECIALLY INCINERATION** (dioxins and furans).

POPs are carbon-based (and mostly chlorine-based) compounds and mixtures with common characteristics. As a class, POPs create problems that can only be solved on a global scale.

**POPs are persistent in the environment. They resist being broken down by sunlight, chemical and/or biological processes.**

**Because many POPs are semi-volatile (i.e. they vaporize at warmer temperatures and condense as the air gets cooler), they can travel long distances on air currents before returning to the earth. POPs travel like grasshoppers, rising into the air, settling back to earth, rising again, moving on air currents. By this means, POPs are "distilled" and they tend to move from warmer climates to colder climates. POPs can also be transported by ocean currents and through the migration of species that carry them in their bodies. Thus the Nordic countries, Canada, Alaska and other near-Arctic territories are significantly contaminated with hormone-disrupting POPs even though the sources of such chemicals lie thousands of miles to the south.[2]

**Because POPs are generally fat soluble, they concentrate as they move up the food chain, magnifying thousands of times as they move into species at the top of the food chain --big fish, large birds, bears, wolves, and humans, for example.**

**POPs have been shown to cause a number of adverse health affects in both humans and animals, including cancers, immune system disorders, and serious reproductive maladies.[3]**

For example, in April the U.S. government issued a series of new studies linking dioxin to human cancers and to damage to the human immune system.[4] And just this week Norwegian researchers reported finding four hermaphroditic polar bears, meaning bears born with both male and female sex organs, on the arctic Svalbard islands. According to the TIMES OF LONDON, the bears' sexual deformities are thought to result from exposure to PCBs.[5]

**Humans living in the Arctic, particularly Inuit people whose traditional diet includes marine mammals and fish, have some of the highest body burdens of POPs in the world, even though they live thousands of miles from any important industrial sources.[6]**

Continuous exposure to such high levels of POPs has raised concerns about the physical, sociocultural and economic well-being of Aboriginal Northerners[2] --raising fundamental questions of environmental justice on an international scale.

The POPs treaty negotiations, which will take about five meetings to complete, are expected to end by 2000, and will be held in different locations around the world. After the negotiations end, the new treaty will need to be ratified by each country. At that point the U.S. and other governments will come under pressure to bring domestic laws and practices into line with the provisions of the new agreement, though action on many POPs is certain to begin even before legally binding mandates go into effect.

There is some recognition that each of the three broad classes of POPs (pesticides, industrial chemicals and toxic by-products) will require a unique strategic approach.

When the United Nations Environment Programme decided to initiate the POPs negotiations, it made clear that different actions will be needed for different classes of POPs, with the following language:

**"For the listed POP pesticides, measures should be taken to rapidly phase out remaining production and subsequent remaining use as alternatives are made available for the small number of remaining recognized uses."[7]**

**"For the listed POP industrial chemicals there is need to phase out, over time, PCBs and HCB [hexachlorobenzene] on a global scale and, in the transition to complete elimination of use, there is need for managing remaining use, storage and disposal."[7]**

**"For POPs that are generated as unwanted by-products [e.g. dioxins and furans], currently available measures that can achieve a realistic and meaningful level of release reduction and/or source elimination should be pursued expeditiously, and this should be done by actions that are feasible and practical and additional measures should be explored and implemented."[7]**

**"Realistic action should be taken to destroy obsolete stocks of the listed POPs and remediate environmental reservoirs."[7]**
At this stage the U.S. government sees the POPs treaty as a process that will require few changes in existing environmental laws. "The United States and many other countries have already taken substantial action to address risks associated with the pollutants identified for action in international bodies," the State Department says.[8] Yet U.S. laws currently put much faith in risk assessment and the management and control of POPs and their sources, particularly dioxins. This is contrary to the goal of zero discharge and elimination.

A coalition of activists --called the International POPs Elimination Network, or IPEN-- has formed to monitor the development of the POPs treaty. IPEN's provisional platform says that, for any chemical listed as a POP, "the assumption is that a chemical has no acceptable emission limit value; no acceptable daily intake, etc. (except as needed on an interim basis with clear phase-out deadlines)... Once a substance is listed as a POP, it is inappropriate to accept its continued generation and release in perpetuity. We reject the claim that emissions and releases of POPs can be effectively and safely managed and controlled forever."[9]

If "elimination" of chemicals such as dioxin becomes the treaty goal -- i.e., zero discharge --then the U.S. government will have to change its regulatory approach, since current regulations define "acceptable" emissions limits. Further, new regulations would have to be enacted to address sources of POPs like dioxin --such as building fires involving PVC [polyvinyl chloride], or backyard barrel burning --which EPA [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency] has identified but not yet regulated.[10]

At this early stage, no one is opposed to the negotiations. Even The International Council of Chemical Associations (the chemical industry's global representative) supports the negotiations, at least publicly. They recognize that POPs pose problems that can no longer be ignored and, so instead of opposing the treaty, they have adopted a "constructive" stance, but will work vigorously to restrict the treaty's provisions to ones with only minimal impact on the economic interests of transnational chemical corporations.

With few exceptions, there is very little economic interest in continued deliberate production of the original 12 POPs. Last year, for example, Velsicol Chemical Co., under pressure from the U.S. government (and probably from some other chemical manufacturers) announced it would stop producing heptachlor and chlordane, the last two chemicals on the initial POPs list to be deliberately manufactured in the U.S. [11]

The negotiation of a strong POPs treaty will require vigilant oversight from the global environmental and public health communities.

The question of whether the POPs treaty will aim to "reduce" or "eliminate" dioxins, for instance, is one of several crucial issues at stake. If the aim is to merely "reduce" dioxins, then governments (such as the U.S.) will only have to point to recently-enacted regulations on some major sources such as medical waste incinerators, garbage incinerators and pulp and paper mills. If this happens, an opportunity to accept the precautionary principle deeper into law will have been lost.

--by Charlie Cray[1]

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[8] FEDERAL REGISTER Vol. 63, No. 92 (May 13, 1998), pgs. 26668-26670. The U.S. government's negotiating team will be represented by an interagency working group chaired by the State Department. The State Department hosted a public meeting June 3, 1998, to "outline issues likely to arise in the context of the negotiations" at Montreal and beyond. For more information, contact Mr. Trigg Talley, U.S. Department of State (202)-647-5808 for more information.

[9] International POPs Elimination Network provisional platform can be found at www.psr.org. Groups are urged to join IPEN and sign on to the provisional platform.
