

NO POISON IN DALIAN: SHUTTING DOWN A CHEMICAL PLANT

SUMMARY

On Aug 8, 2011, a storm broke loose some twenty metal tanks at the Fujia plant in Dalian, China, a facility producing the carcinogenic chemical paraxylene (PX). Local residents were evacuated and the military came to make repairs to the dike. The government reported that no chemicals escaped, but local people expressed suspicion and concern on Sina Weibo (the Chinese equivalent to Twitter).

Source: China News Service



Journalists making inquiries at the facility were detained and a popular local TV host had his microblog frozen, as well as a program on Dalian canceled. When it was leaked that the plant had not followed proper procedure in its initial set up, the public became mobilized, referencing the community of Xiamen who had forced their PX plant to close. On August 13th, a poster circulated online calling for a “group stroll”

from the People’s Square to the Municipal Government building.

Early Sunday morning, August 14th, an initial group of protesters staged a sit-in at the Municipal Building, while estimates of a 12,000 to 70,000 person crowd gathered by midday. Marchers were highly organized with pre-printed signs, shirts, and slogans, remaining largely nonviolent. When the local Communist Party Secretary stood on a police car and told the crowd the plant would close, they insisted on a timetable. Late Sunday night, an official report came that the plant would be shut down immediately and most of the crowd dispersed. On Monday morning, the plant was still open, but by that afternoon, it had ended production and it was confirmed that the plant would move to an undecided location outside of Dalian.

ISSUE

Concerns over the Fujia chemical plant—in the downtown port of Dalian—and its production of the carcinogenic chemical paraxylene

WHO

Largely middle class residents

WHERE

Dalian, China

GOALS

To force the Fujia plant to move out of Dalian

STRATEGY

To make it too difficult to maintain the plant in Dalian through a mass display of opposition

PLANNED OR SPONTANEOUS?

Planned. It is not clear who organized the protest, but on August 13th, a poster spread on the internet calling for a "group stroll" at 10 a.m. on Sunday, August 14th from the People's Square toward the Municipal Government Building in Dalian. (The term "stroll" had previously been used by other grassroots activists in China to mean protest march).

ISSUE FRAMING

The issue was framed in terms of public health and safety, corruption, and censorship

LEADERS, PARTICIPANTS, ALLIES INCLUDING ELITES

- Undisclosed leadership, though largely middle class residents of Dalian
- Journalists reporting on the story, including popular TV host Bai-Yansong

TARGET

- Local Communist Party Secretary Tang Jun
- Local government and Fujia plant officials

OPPONENT(S)

Local government and Fujia plant officials



Tang Jun

TACTICS

- Posting opposition on microblogs (dispersed)
- Sit-in (concentrated)
- Public protest march (concentrated)

Source: Reuters

When microblogging of public opinion was not enough to close the plant, a sit-in and march were organized. Government officials promised to shut down the plant, but marchers did not disperse until they were given a specific time frame.



The anonymity of cyber activism made the risk fairly low for many at the beginning. However, as tactics and organizing grew more intense, so did the risk. There was a chance organizers could be found out and the large police force at the protest could have turned on the crowd. The size of the demonstration helped protect them, though, as did the government's seeming desire to placate the middle class.

RESPONSE BY OPPONENT

The local government responded quickly to the demand to shut and move the plant, stopping production around a week after the initial accident.

MEDIA & MESSAGING

The messages at the march were clear, such as:

- "Get out Fujia PX!"
- "PX out!"
- "I love Dalian and reject poison!"
- "Protect Dalian!"

There was media coverage, however, censors attempted to erase any internet posts referring to the protest, including blocking searches for words like "PX" and "Dalian Protests." There seemed to be a particular censorship of Tang Jun's effort to disperse the demonstrators by addressing their demands.

OUTCOMES

The plant closed and moved away from downtown Dalian. It is unclear if it reopened and impacted another community, and whether taxpayers had to pay for the relocation. At any rate, the protesters gained an important victory, making clear demands and achieving them through mass mobilization and cyberactivism.