

To: Paul Polman  
CEO, Unilever Plc  
United Kingdom

Dear Mr. Polman:

You have been very vocal about the role of business in sustainable development. A recent article in The Telegraph quotes you as having said: "Profit is not a purpose. It's an end product... People assume that if you do something good, it must cost money. I don't know where they get that idea from... [Business leaders] don't need to compromise." We are also aware of your stated intent to improve labour and human rights within your sphere of influence and throughout Unilever's supply chain.

That is why, it is with some hope that we are writing to you regarding a pressing issue concerning the health of hundreds of your former workers and the environment in and around the mercury thermometer factory that your subsidiary operated in Kodaikanal, India. We are sure you are aware that the factory was shut down in March 2001 by the state's environmental regulatory agency after it was found to have illegally dumped mercury-tainted wastes in a metal scrapyards. The factory site is yet to be cleaned up. As for the workers, a report of a committee set up by the Government of India has found workers have been exposed to mercury due to poor occupational hygiene at the thermometer factory. The report also concludes that workers and their families have been affected due to the exposure.

In the years since the factory was shut down, dozens of workers have died prematurely due to illnesses that they suspect were caused by their exposure to mercury in the workplace. Debilitating illnesses, including memory loss and nervous tremors, are hindering the ability of many other workers to earn a living. Particularly saddening is the plight of ex-workers with brain-impaired children to care for. You have spoken articulately and boldly about the role of businesses in the fight against global poverty. Unilever's role in this fight should begin with ensuring that its actions or inactions do not end up impoverishing families of workers who have contributed to the company's growth. Unilever's continued denial of ex-workers demands for compensation and health care is unconscionable and goes against the company's declared positions on labour rights and poverty eradication.

On the issue of environment, Unilever has downgraded the standards to which it will clean-up the factory site and its surroundings based on technocommercial considerations. It is precisely this manifestation of capitalism that you have taken to task.

Given your stated positions, and the clear actions that are required to repair the situation, we expect to hear back from you expressing your willingness to meet the demands of the workers and the community.

Sincerely,

Bobby Peek  
Director, groundWork (Friends of the Earth South Africa)  
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