

BIRN journalists spent the entire last autumn in Beocin collecting data on pollution and people's testimonies. The word that appeared in all the conversations was - fear.

"Everyone is afraid for their positions, don't blame them," they say in the Spasimo Beocin association. "The problem is not in Lafarge, but in the system. The whole municipality depends on one company. Beocin would disappear without that factory. People are thinking - it's better to poison us, but to have a job".

When BIRN reporters visited the city, a thick cloud of smoke covered nearby houses. Citizens say that it is a dangerous poison, managers in the factory say that it is harmless water vapor.

When Lafarge bought a cement plant in Beocin in 2002, citizens expected better wages and cleaner air. However, the new owners started using far more harmful petroleum coke instead of natural gas and burning hazardous waste. In 2019, the inspection established that large amounts of toxic substances were released into the air, but the court process is not in sight. And in Beocin, that never surprises.

Since 2011, the factory has been burning municipal waste, and in 2018, the factory received an integrated permit that allows them to burn medical waste, cars, tires, hazardous oils and plastics.

"They claim that in their furnaces, high temperatures destroy all harmful substances, which is not true. Rotary kilns in cement plants are not designed for waste incineration", they say in the organization Spasimo Beočin, stating that the filters in cement plants are designed only for cement dust, and not for toxins generated by incineration of hazardous waste. At the time Lafarge bought the company, it employed 2,040 workers, mostly from Beocin. The media then wrote that the workers received huge compensations, that they bought several cars, houses...

Today, only a few hundred people work in the cement plant. "No director or top manager of the company lives in Beocin anymore. The last one moved away a month before the start of burning the garbage", they say in the organization Save Beocin.

"We were told to keep quiet"

BIRN contacted a cement plant worker who worked in the hazardous waste incineration area. He agreed to speak to BIRN on condition that we guarantee his anonymity.

"Everything was there, from motor oil, through oil sludge, medical syringes to animal waste. I received information from the laboratory that mercury manages to come out through the filters, but we were all told to keep quiet and that according to the contract we signed, we must not talk about work. And people really behaved like that. There were people who got

cancer, but we were all just thinking about how to make money. That was the only thing that mattered to us “, says this interlocutor.

In Beocin, none of the doctors we contacted were ready to talk to us. The only information we managed to get was from the Serbian Orthodox cemetery. During three years (2017-2019), 99 inhabitants of Beocin were buried there. Of those, 27, just under a third, died of cancer. The average in Serbia is 21 percent.

Representatives of Lafarge told BIRN that from the very beginning of their business in Serbia, they have been working on improving the cement production process.

“For that purpose, through modernization of equipment and optimization of the process, we have invested over 150 million euros, which has significantly improved the state of the environment in Beocin, because all our plants are covered with filters that ensure that emissions are significantly below the limit values prescribed by law and integrated permit.” for work “, they say from Lafarge, stating that all filters” are designed to provide emissions lower than the allowed values, regardless of the type of energy used “.

Since arriving in Serbia, Lafarge has had the full support of local authorities, as well as national authorities who wanted to please foreign investors, even at the cost of damaging the health of citizens.

“The worst thing is that Lafarge and other polluters have their accomplices at the top of the state,” Zlatko Todorcevski of the Beocin Environmental Movement told BIRN.

They are aware of that in another environmental association in that place - the organization Save Save Beocin. “If we look at the laws, permits - we can clearly say that the cement plant in Beocin does not violate any of these documents. That is the greatest tragedy “, they say in this association.

As one of the absurd examples, they cite the obligation according to which the factory is obliged to test hazardous substances twice a year, including furans and dioxins. The factory can choose the laboratory that will do the research, and the research is done on the days when the factory calls them.

“Of course, in those days, they reduce the release of toxins and the results will be good,” say the Spasimo Beocin organization, stating that even such information is not announced publicly by the factory.

Lafarge told BIRN that all types of measurements work in accordance with the prescribed laws.

Inspectors of the Provincial Inspectorate for Environmental Protection of Vojvodina visited the cement plant on November 21, 2019, in order to perform extraordinary supervision. The report that the inspection sent to Radio 021, states that on that occasion, they determined

that the cement plant released harmful substances into the air of as much as 200 percent higher concentration than allowed.

The inspection analyzed the data in the period from August 31, 2019 to November 21, 2019.

It was noted that in September of that year, the cement plant released a total of 62 times hydrogen chloride, whose values exceeded the prescribed value by 200 percent.

In October 2019, the cement plant released as much as 847 times into the air powdered substances, sulfur dioxide, hydrogen fluoride, hydrogen chloride, ammonia and nitrogen oxides, as much as two hundred percent more than the allowed emission limit values. In November 2019, such omissions were recorded 316 times.

The inspection also determined that Lafarge used 963 tons of hazardous waste without prior quality control.

The inspection announced that it will make a decision which will ask the company to implement measures that would remove the observed illegalities. Also, the inspection announced that it would submit a report to the competent court. However, two years later, no court proceedings are in sight.

Source: birn.rs