

Detroit-area residents protest Marathon Oil request to increase air pollution

Our reporters
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Once again, the Michigan Department of Environment Quality, (MDEQ) is involved in a public relations ploy to deceive workers and youth just a few weeks after Republican Governor Rick Snyder publicly acknowledged that the state mishandled the water crisis in Flint for almost the past two years.

This time it is not the Drinking Water Division, but the Air Quality Division (AQD) which is another sub-group within the MDEQ.

With a crowd estimated at 300 people or more, angry residents and concerned citizens filled a high school auditorium in southwest Detroit to express their outrage and opposition over the AQD's proposal to give Marathon Oil the legal right to release more toxic pollutants into the surrounding areas and atmosphere.

Coming off the completion of \$2.2 billion upgrade which began 2012, Marathon is requesting a permit from the state to emit an additional 22 tons of sulfur dioxide per year. On average, 238 tons per year have been pushed out into the atmosphere by Michigan's only refinery in the last two years.

AQD officials claim that the increase will remain within acceptable limits, thus not posing a danger to the public's health in a half dozen downriver communities or across the Detroit river into Canada.

Before the official start of the public hearing, law enforcement officers were positioning themselves inside and outside the high school in preparation for any possible disturbance, in addition to the fact that police headquarters sits adjacent from the school.

MDEQ support staff were manning informational tables and pre-registering speakers in the main hallway while AQD representatives, who traveled from the state capital Lansing, were walking up and down the aisles soliciting questions from the audience for an hour.

During the opening of the public hearing, AQD officials read off a host of disclaimers as to the range and limits of

their jurisdiction in what they were and not responsible for. However, there were two statements made by the AQD officials which established an antagonistic relationship with the audience. As a result, the underlying theme of political exclusion was set throughout the remainder of the formal meeting.

First, it was the chairperson for the AQD who said that the law did not require MDEQ to report support or opposition prior to its decision in granting a permit to Marathon. The overwhelming majority in attendance reacted with audible shock and dismay.

And second, the Chief of the Air Quality Division said that the MDEQ was in a partnership with the City of Detroit during the process. Many in the crowd began to suspect that the fix was already in the works due the fact that the Detroit city government is still under the auspices of the financial oversight committee for at least the next decade while retiree' pensions have been severely slashed and hundreds of city workers laid-off late last year.

When the floor was opened for public comments, one person after another came to the microphone to explain how they, family members and friends have had to endure the smell of foul odors and chemicals back-flowing into their basements, which have contributed to an adverse effect on their personal health. A major cause of concern among residents is the breathing problems incurred by older neighbors and children who experience shortness of breath and/or asthma.

After the meeting a reporting team for the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Ebony Elmore, who is a life-long resident of River Rouge, a downriver suburb of Detroit, and a volunteer member of the Sierra Club, an environmental group, for the last 2 years.

Elmore stated, "I am here to speak out. I am concerned about the future of our younger generation. I am also concerned about the idea of adding more sulfur dioxide by Marathon into the air. My father used to work for US

Steel on Zug Island for ten years. He suffers from chronic issues such as heart and lung problems. My father has to carry around a hand-held breathing ventilator and he has to get to help from his wife, who has also become sick, to see the doctor often. My mother was recently diagnosed with (COPD) chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Now, both my father and mother each have to use a hand-held breathing ventilators. They have been married for over 20 years.”

Southeastern Michigan is one of the most heavily industrialized areas in the United States. Marathon is located along the I-75 corridor, which is also home to Detroit Salt, Detroit Wastewater Treatment Plant, CSX Railways, AK Steel Dearborn (formerly known as Severstal) and United States Steel. All of these industrial locations are within a geographical mile of each other. It is no coincidence then that the 48217 zip code has been the area with the highest pollution rate in the entire state for years.

Last month, the United States Steel Corporation in Ecorse, Michigan was granted a relaxed air quality permit by the AQD without any input from the general public. In an approval letter dated December 6, 2015, US Steel was given an early Christmas gift by the state when the AQD officials modified the permit to say “records shall be updated every shift rather than every hour. The recordkeeping did not need to be frequent due to the new alarm system and associated recordkeeping.”

And yet, thousands of US steelworkers and skilled tradesmen continued to work 12-hour shifts, 6 to 7 days a week, without a contract for a several months.

Behind the decision-making process of MDEQ stand both Republicans and Democrats. From the federal to local level, both parties have passed relaxed regulation laws, which have minimized job safety and public health standards, in order for big corporations and wealthy investors to make profit at the expense of society and the working class in particular.



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