

Fires at Detroit wastewater plant underscore danger of job cuts

Dan Coles
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On March 4, at approximately 5:30 a.m., a two-alarm fire broke out at the Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP) located in southwest Detroit. The fire occurred at the end of the week just days before the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was scheduled to conduct an audit of the plant.

This is the first potentially serious environmental and public health threat since the municipally owned Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) facility was taken over by the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA). The regional authority began operating the facility three months ago as part of the 2013-2014 bankruptcy restructuring of the city of Detroit.

The capacity to prevent the fire or to respond safely to it has been undermined by the huge job cutting at the facility. Since 2011, the number of city employees at the massive facility has been reduced from 650 to 150.

The cause of the fire, which started on the fourth floor of Complex 2 Incineration, was friction created from a moving conveyor belt rubbing up against massive piles of dry sludge wedged throughout the metal frame. The sludge is made up of semi-solid material that is the byproduct of de-watering (drying) of human waste and other organic material. The heat caused the sludge to ignite while employees were conducting cleanup one floor above. The large diagonal belt, known as Conveyor Belt “H,” is four feet wide and several hundred feet long, with a three-story tall incline.

Over the weekend, it was revealed that the fire had not successfully been put out and that several hot spots and flare-ups in the pile were emerging due to spontaneous combustion. The media reported that another fire broke out on Saturday. In at least two additional instances, smoldering embers reignited decomposing sludge, slowly releasing methane gas in a confined work area with little or no ventilation.

Several GLWA employees who spoke anonymously to the *World Socialist Web Site* said the fire hose cabinets were empty and the fire connections had inadequate water pressure.

Only a few hours after the first fire was extinguished, and before any professional or technical assessment could be made, GLWA chief administrator and compliance officer William M. Wolfson rushed before television news cameras to downplay the extent of the fire and subsequent damage.

The Detroit WWTP is the largest single-site wastewater

facility in the United States, and the presence of substantial combustible material and stored chemicals in the six-story C2 Incineration facility poses a huge danger to workers and residents of the surrounding working class community.

“There is no environmental issue; there is no employee safety issue; and we’re going to be able to continue to treat the sludge as we would normally,” Wolfson insisted.

Images of large, bright red flames coming from the rooftop of C2 Incineration were captured from the ground by WWJ News and in the air by a FOX2 helicopter news crew.

While GLWA officials downplayed concerns, plant management threatened sewage treatment workers and technicians with termination if they were caught anywhere near the area. Workers have reported that flimsy barricades were hastily constructed to prevent anyone from entering. Some workers believe that management did not want any photos or videos to be posted on social media to convey the real damage caused by the fire, or contradict the official narrative by GLWA authorities.

Several City of Detroit retirees who used to work at the plant told the WSWWS that the images seen on television suggest that this industrial fire was the worst in last 30 years at the facility.

Detroit Fire Department officials have had to put highly trained firefighters on an around-the-clock “fire-watch” alert. Hazardous materials (HAZMAT) team members were the only ones authorized to occupy the control room and man the phones in the C2 Incineration facility not far from where the conveyor belt fire started.

In spite of the fact that workers have been reassigned to other locations onsite, the workforce as a whole has been subjected to airborne carcinogens emitted from the charred remains of building materials and industrial pollutants, including the dry sludge.

The C2 Incineration facility is currently completely shut down. It may be inoperable for some time. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on projects to upgrade the eight multiple-hearth incinerators at the facility, which began almost 18 months ago. A final assessment has yet to be made as to how severely the fire damaged the upgrades.

On March 7, upper plant management and safety personnel conducted an initial walkout to survey the damage caused by

the fire. They reported that the metal frame, which supports “H” belt, had been warped in several spots. This means it will have to be dismantled and a new metal frame constructed and re-installed. A 25-ton overhead crane was affected by the intense heat. Other conveyor belts were also severely damaged.

The incineration facility is an integral part of the wastewater treatment process. With the rainy season coming—which can send a huge volume of water and silt to the treatment plant—C2 Incineration’s capacity to burn several hundred tons of wet sludge in an eight-hour shift will now be extremely limited for weeks, perhaps months.

The incineration facility will become the sole workhorse when the older Complex Incineration is permanently mothballed on March 21. The City of Detroit has not invested \$25 million to rehabilitate the original six multiple-hearth incinerators in the complex, which has been operational since the 1950s.

The City of Detroit partnered with the New England Fertilizer Company (NEFCO) to get into the fertilizer market by building another sludge processing facility across the street from the Detroit WWTP. Although the BioSolids Drying Facility (BDF) is owned by the City of Detroit, it is run by NEFCO for profit.

GLWA spokesman Wolfson claims BDF will be sufficient to treat sludge. In recent weeks, however, the facility has had continuous problems meeting state regulations for emissions.

Even if the current situation is resolved, it is only a matter of time before another crisis occurs. The drastic cut in the workforce, reduction in wages and benefits of current employees, and lack of sufficient supplies are a recipe for an industrial disaster. In the past, experienced and trained city employees would have recognized the potential for fire hazards and acted accordingly to reduce the contributing factors associated with the danger. But instead, hundreds of workers such as custodians, engineers, laboratory technicians, sewage plant operators, maintenance repairman, safety officers and supervisors have been laid off since April 2015.

In addition, physical stress is taking its toll on the small number of employees who were selected to remain with GLWA. A female employee who gave birth to a child December 30 of last year had a stroke and went into a coma two weeks later. A sewage plant operator with over 10 years of experience quit and moved to Texas to work as an aviation repair mechanic.

In a press statement, GLWA CEO Sue F. McCormick claimed, “Understaffing was not the cause of the fire.” Officials have said that they will look into the possibility that the fire was caused by mechanical failure or human error. Any such “investigation” will only be used to cover up management’s role in savage cost cutting and to shift blame onto the workers themselves.

For its part, Local 207 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which used to represent more than 900 workers, mostly at WWTP, issued a

statement saying, “GLWA management and MDEQ (Michigan Department of Environmental Quality) are to blame for this costly accident, which could lead to further rate increases, and not the workers who are forced to labor under these conditions.”

AFSCME is currently involved in a sordid jurisdictional dispute with the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 324, which is now the officially recognized bargaining unit for the dwindling number of employees. In fact, the AFSCME union has been complicit in the attacks on city workers. The union agreed to the “Grand Bargain” crafted by US Bankruptcy Judge Steven Rhodes (now the “transitional manager” of the Detroit Public Schools) that cut workers’ health and pension benefits, sold off public assets and established the GLWA, which is a prelude for the privatization of the water system. In return, AFSCME was given control of a \$500 million retiree trust fund, which will serve as a lucrative investment vehicle for the union bureaucrats.

From the beginning, the municipally-owned water system was looked at as the “jewel in the crown” by the city’s emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, who immediately sent out bids for the privatization of the system. Tens of thousands of residents had their service terminated in an effort to clear the system’s “bad debt” and entice Wall Street investors to take it over.

Orr also contracted Veolia North America, an affiliate of the giant French conglomerate that is one of the largest water privatizers in the world, to slash the workforce. The GLWA was set up to bypass any obstacle to privatization contained in the City Charter or other municipal regulations.

The same players pushing for this from the Republican administration of Governor Rick Snyder, including former secretary treasurer Andy Dillon, a Democrat and former investment banker, also pushed for the setting up of a regional water authority to take over the provision of Flint’s water. The April 2014 decision to separate Flint from the DWSD-controlled pipeline and water treatment plant near Lake Huron set into motion the current lead poisoning disaster in Flint.

While it is fortunate that no GLWA employee or contractor was hurt in the Detroit fire, the fate of workers and residents of the area cannot be left in the hands of officials, Democrat or Republican, whose single-minded drive to satisfy the demands of Wall Street are creating the conditions for more Flints.



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