

# More than 1,000 to be displaced by demolition of low-income housing development in Indiana

Catherine Long  
3 September 2016

Over 1,000 people have been given 60-day move out notices in the low-income West Calumet Housing Development in East Chicago, Indiana due to very high levels of lead and arsenic in the soil.

The housing development was built by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1973 on the former site of Anaconda Lead Products and has been an official Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Superfund site since 2009. Other large lead smelters continued to operate in the area until 1985. An elementary school, Carrie Gosch Elementary, was also constructed on the site in 2008.

Extremely high levels of lead and arsenic are present in the soil due to the historic absence of environmental controls on the metal smelting industry in the area. Despite having filed for bankruptcy, many of these companies—USS Lead, DuPont and Atlantic Richfield—were successfully sued by the EPA and the State Health Board of Indiana for the funding to clean up these contaminated, deindustrialized sites. That money was earmarked for funding the cleanup of the Superfund site in East Chicago.

The EPA developed and submitted a cleanup plan to the East Chicago authorities in July 2012 to do soil remediation *in situ* that would allow residents to stay in their homes. This would have involved the EPA removing up to two feet of soil and disposing of it in a special landfill. Clean soil and barriers would have been installed to protect from future leaching back into the clean soil. The plans which would be most effective in protecting public health ranged from \$28.9 to \$48.3 million.

Several samplings were done by the EPA and other agencies over 25 years to understand the extent of the

lead and arsenic contamination over the 79 acre area. As of their report in 2012, the EPA reported 9,406mg/kg of lead and 567mg/kg of arsenic. The “remedial action levels” for each of these contaminants is 400mg/kg lead and 26.4mg/kg arsenic. These figures are for the proportion of each contaminant in the soil, which enter the body by activities as benign as touching the soil or breathing in the dust of disturbed soil.

Within weeks after the EPA began remediation in East Chicago, the mayor’s office issued a notice to residents that the soil conditions were far more hazardous than previously understood and strongly encouraged residents to relocate. On August 30th, they ordered residents to vacate, as they plan to bulldoze the approximately 300 low-income homes. HUD relocation housing vouchers have come through for some residents but not all, and the city demands that all relocations must be done by the end of November this year so demolition can begin.

Many families have complained that they cannot afford to relocate, with HUD vouchers giving them a choice of housing but not the funds to pay security deposits and moving costs. Members of the community have attempted to raise money and donate goods to help residents move. Children at the local elementary school have been moved to a nearby middle school over safety fears. Families are being encouraged by the EPA to have their lead levels tested by the East Chicago Health Department. Families report long-term symptoms consistent with very high lead levels, such as lethargy, vomiting and headaches.

The EPA was created by executive order of President Richard Nixon in 1970. Concern for the human and industrial impact on the environment was one of the

many popular movements of the 1960s, with books like *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson illuminating the devastating impact of industrial pollution on the environment. The creation of the EPA and the limited regulatory authority it enjoyed for several decades was the ruling class response to public anger at the decimation of nature.

Heavy industrial use left many factory sites contaminated with heavy metals, including lead, arsenic and mercury. If left in place, these heavy metals can enter the groundwater and sicken entire cities. Recovery of these lands and waters was left to the EPA's oversight.

The Superfund program came out of Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) legislation, aimed at holding companies who improperly disposed of toxic waste accountable. Several decades of legislation in response to ever more egregious dumping gave way to the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA), which includes a trust fund, the Superfund, for cleaning up toxic wastes.

The 1940s and 50s were the golden age of chemistry and physics in the United States, with compounds like DDT and lead acetate seen as wonder products for insect control. Farmers and communities sprayed these new pesticides with faith that the scientific advances of the post-war era would lead humanity into a new age of plenty. Companies like Dow Chemical and DuPont made massive profits. Decades would pass before the persistence of these compounds was revealed in the environment, most famously the devastation of the bald eagle population from DDT bioaccumulation.

EPA Region 5 covers both East Chicago, Indiana and Flint, Michigan. It is not ironic that the two cities are joined in crisis over the lead poisoning of their children. The deindustrialized Rust Belt has left countless Midwestern cities in poverty and dealing with the fallout of their industrial past. The car batteries used for cars in Flint were reprocessed for their lead in East Chicago.

The industries that once gave Midwestern working class families decent incomes and relative comfort have had those social gains yanked out from under them. Environmental devastation, public health crises and ever deeper poverty are all expressions of the crisis of capitalism.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**