

Former Bethlehem Steel plant near Buffalo, New York destroyed by fire

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A former Bethlehem Steel Plant site near Buffalo, New York caught fire last month and burned to the ground, endangering the lives and health of nearby residents as well as the firefighters tasked with putting out the massive blaze. Video of the fire can be seen [here](#).

Authorities believe the fire began when a hanging light bulb fell in an area of the site now inhabited by Industrial Materials Recycling and ignited a piece of cardboard at around 7 a.m. on November 9.

The fire quickly spread engulfing nearly the entire sprawling site, which covers roughly six blocks in the city of Lackawanna, located just south of Buffalo.

The raging fire caused the city to announce a State of Emergency, close nearby highways, cancel school and order the evacuation of about 300 homes of working-class residents for several days located near the site in the Bethlehem Park neighborhood.

On November 15 the New York Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) declared that the air tested in the Bethlehem Park neighborhood ranged from “very unhealthy” to “hazardous” due to high levels of particulate matter. Air quality tests found high levels of “carcinogenic benzene, vinyl chloride, butadiene and styrene.”

At one point during testing, the DEC measured benzene levels at 180 times higher than background levels. In addition to the abandoned portions of the former steel factory, antique cars, boats, cardboard and plastics stored at the site also went up in flames.

The DEC will continue testing including of the levels various carcinogens deposited in the ground as well as for asbestos which was potentially spewed into the air during the fire.

Lackawanna residents, many of whom now have homes covered in toxic soot, are saddled with the task

of cleaning their homes of dangerous carcinogens while at the same time being exposed to hazardous conditions without proper training or safety equipment.

Officials announced at press conference on December 1, more than three weeks after the fire, that Great Lakes Industrial Development, the owner of the property, would cover the cost of home cleanup if residents called a special “cleanup hotline.”

According to the *Buffalo News* Democratic State Assembly member Sean Ryan noted at the press conference that while “Great Lakes will take responsibility for cleaning people’s houses, it’s not a self-executing process.”

“Great Lakes isn’t going to reach out to you. You have to reach out to them,” Ryan stated. “They will financially pay for the cost of the interior cleaning—and if you’ve already paid money out to a private company—Great Lakes will work with you to get that cost reimbursed.”

Resident Ashley Torres told the *Buffalo News* that she had found her daughter’s crib covered in black soot and that she had spent much of the past few weeks throwing out contaminated personal items.

Another resident, Clarence “Butch” Yeager, told the *Buffalo News* that when he returned from the forced evacuation on November 13, “...my house was full of smoke. I opened the door, and smoke came out.”

While the large part of the fire has ended, hot spots continue to ignite smaller fires that must be continually monitored and put out by firefighters. A total cost for the damages has yet to be determined.

At its peak in 1965 the now-ruined steel plant employed over 20,000 steelworkers at livable wages and contributed to over 75 percent of the city of Lackawanna’s tax revenue. Its closure in 1982 devastated Lackawanna, much of South Buffalo, and

other nearby suburbs where workers lived as the ruling class carried out a ruthless strategy of closing industrial factories no longer deemed to be profitable enough.

Fault for the fire and the dangerous pollution that is following lies solely with the ruling class and its political representatives.

The potentially dangerous conditions and high levels of contamination left behind at the site were well known before the fire. In 1988 the Environmental Protection Agency declared the facility a Superfund site, which is a designation used by the federal government to identify sites that pose significant risk to human health and/or the environment. The state also later declared it an inactive hazardous waste site, indicating that it was a potentially significant threat to human health and the environment.

Despite the many pollutants left at the site, a bankruptcy judge cleared Bethlehem Steel of any responsibility for cleaning it up and neither the federal EPA or the state took responsibility for cleaning the site.

Furthermore, the site had been prone to fires; three previous smaller fires had taken place at the site between 2014 and 2016. The most recent took place in October 2016 at a mulch-grinding business located on the site. Several other businesses on the site had also been cited for violations of the New York State fire code and the Lackawanna Municipal Code.

Why such businesses were allowed to continue to operate on a dangerous and highly polluted site, itself a colossal monument to the bankruptcy of the capitalist system, has yet to be answered.



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