

Reckless coal plant demolition covers Chicago's Little Village neighborhood in dust amid coronavirus lockdown

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The demolition of a 96-year old coal plant Saturday caused dust to coat the surrounding Chicago neighborhood of Little Village. The city issued the permit for demolition just 11 days before, in the midst of the global coronavirus pandemic which has infected nearly 17,000 people and killed 630 in the city and surrounding Cook County.

The dust cloud spread over a three-quarter-mile radius forcing residents to stay indoors. Those living closest to the demolition reported dust entering through cracks in the door and windows of their homes. Residents told the *World Socialist Web Site* they were only given a one-day notice of the planned demolition and some reported being given no notice at all.

The city is under an official stay-at-home order and only essential businesses are supposed to be operating. Why the city approved the demolition taking place under these conditions remains to be answered.

On a community Facebook page, resident Jazmine Barrera remarked, “Did they really have to do this with COVID-19 going on. It’s been shut down all these [years] and just now they decided.” Another added, “We knew this was coming... they don’t give a shit about us.”

The coal plant was shuttered in 2012, after decades of polluting the surrounding neighborhood. City inspectors and developer Hilco Redevelopment Partners claimed that asbestos removal was completed on the site and the demolition posed no threat to public health. However, there is little reason to believe the job was done right. What toxic chemicals, if any, were in the dust that coated the area remains to be seen.

Fernando Cantú, a 78-year-old man who lived less than a half mile away from the coal plant, died within

hours of the implosion. Cantu, who had suffered from asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), had been outside that afternoon and was dead by 3 a.m. the next day.

Emissions from coal facilities are known to exacerbate asthma and make people more susceptible to respiratory illnesses, such as pneumonia and influenza. An infection from the novel coronavirus can cause fatal pneumonia, particularly in those have compromised lungs, including from breathing in toxic and polluted air.

Mayor Lori Lightfoot put the blame on the developer for not keeping promises to mitigate the spread of dust. “If anybody in the city government or the alderman’s office knew what was represented to us wasn’t actually going to be followed on site, we would have stopped it in its tracks,” Lightfoot said in a press conference. However, a Chicago Fire Department crew was on scene and made no effort to halt the implosion.

Public outcry and the scale of the disaster has forced Lightfoot to take a stern public tone. On one hand, she promises to make Hilco pay for the clean up, but her plan for accountability stops short of rescinding a \$19.7 million dollar tax credit Hilco gets for developing the property. This exposes the basic class orientation of the Democratic Party, which has enjoyed almost 90 years of one-party rule in Chicago.

Decades of decades of deindustrialization and cuts to social spending overseen by one Democratic administration after another has devastated working class communities like Little Village, exposing the party as no less reactionary than the Republicans.

Situated near a canal on the city’s southwest side, Little Village grew into an intermodal shipping hub.

Containing a scrap yard, an asphalt plant, dozens of warehouses and a plant that manufactures recycled steel products, Crown Steel, this highly industrialized part of the city contains all the pollutants that go along with industry. As surrounding neighborhoods gentrify, increasing rents on substandard housing is pushing out many long-term residents. These are the social conditions that led to a house fire 18 months ago which tragically killed ten children.

Little Village resident Denisse told the WSWS, “I was not given a day of notice when the demolition was going to happen. I would’ve thought our alderman would’ve told us. We get texts from him and [neighboring alderman] Cardenas about elections and all that, but no notification about this building going down.

“It is a terrible time to do this. We already are restricted to our homes and social distancing, now they pretty much poison the air near us. The debris may be filled with asbestos and all other kinds of harmful particles. This was not done in the best interest of the people.”

Another resident, Ivy added, “The demolition was not essential at the moment. I think they decided to take advantage of the situation since we have the stay at home order.”



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