

Opposition to relocation of toxic metal recycling plant to Chicago's working-class South Side raises political questions

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Chicago activists are engaged in a hunger strike to stop the relocation of a metal recycler from a wealthy North Side neighborhood to a working-class neighborhood on Chicago's South Side.

Chicago's working-class neighborhoods bear the burden of being home to most of the city's industrial and manufacturing plants and, with it, their deleterious health consequences. The conditions of Chicago's working-class neighborhoods are the end results of decades of pro-capitalist policies implemented by the Democratic Party.

Reserve Management Group (RMG) shuttered their one-hundred-year-old metal recycling plant, named General Iron, at the end of the last year. Situated on the Chicago River, the former plant is located in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood, an upper-middle-class-to-extremely wealthy neighborhood with an average household income, according to city-data.com, of \$138,558 per year.

RMG is building its new plant, called Southside Recycling, along the Calumet River in Chicago's southeast Hegewisch neighborhood, where the median household income, according to city-data.com, is \$61,168 per year.

The General Iron plant has a history of violations. Between December 2019 and March 2020, it was cited 11 times for violations of pollution and nuisance laws. In May 2020, it agreed to pay \$18,000 to settle with the city, a slap on the wrist overseen by Chicago's Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot.

The driving impetus of RMG's move is the development of the Lincoln Yards project, which neighbors the now defunct plant. The \$6 billion megadevelopment, hatched by former Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, is receiving some \$1.6 billion in city subsidies. The city no doubt worked with RMG to give them a deal to relocate. The opportunity may also give the

company an opportunity to modernize their plant, reduce costs and increase profits, a win-win for the city and company.

The development is a boon for its developers and the already wealthy neighborhood of Lincoln Park and its adjacent neighborhoods. And in turn, Chicago's Southeast Side will receive a toxic metal recycling plant.

Chicago's South Side historically and presently is the manufacturing and industrial base of the city. Along with other plants, it includes the Ford Chicago Assembly Plant, which produces the Ford Explorer, Lincoln Aviator, and the Police Interceptor Utility.

According to a 2020 air quality report conducted by the city, Chicago's overwhelmingly working class South and West Sides are "over-burdened" by "high concentrations of industry experiencing high levels of both pollution and vulnerability."

The new Southside Recycling plant will increase pollution. Its process of shredding and recycling produces toxic metal particles that are emitted into the air and land on surrounding areas.

Air pollution is an enormous health risk. According to the American Lung Association, it increases the risk of "premature death and other serious health effects such as lung cancer, asthma attacks, cardiovascular damage, and developmental and reproductive harm." While asthma hospitalization rates in Chicago are twice the national average of the United States—a horrible enough statistic—the Chicago Health Atlas reports the 60617 zip code in 2017, in which the new plant is located, had the highest number of asthma-related emergency calls in the city for anyone under age 19.

As result of the deadly health risks, which many community members are already familiar with, the metal recycling plant's move to the Southeast Side has been

met with overwhelming opposition from local residents.

One response to the proposed development is an ongoing hunger strike by multiple Chicago activists and community members who oppose the new plant. Activists have been on a limited liquid-only diet for over two weeks. The hunger strikers are appealing to Lightfoot to stop the city from granting RMG a permit to begin operations.

Chicago Mayor Lightfoot recently postured as offering a fig leaf to the hunger strikers. While conceding nothing to their demands, she did reach out to federal regulators for guidance last week. In doing so, Lightfoot is attempting to pawn off responsibility for the decision to allow the plant's operation to proceed—one she has supported up to this point—by having the federal government decide whether the plant's operation violated the civil rights of community members.

The issues raised in the protests of the community members and that of the hunger strikers are legitimate. The plant's relocation will increase the toxicity of the already polluted air in the area and lead to more health problems, if not long-term and life-threatening complications. The issue becomes a question of life or death.

However, activists have sought to portray the plant relocation as an issue of environmental racism. Previously located in the mostly white neighborhood of Lincoln Park, it is now located in a mostly Hispanic neighborhood.

The manner, moreover, in which the opposition is being carried must be assessed soberly. The self-starvation of the hunger strikers, while one might conclude is personally brave, is a political dead-end. The starving of one's self in an attempt to appeal to Lightfoot's morality is devoid of any class analysis.

It was Lightfoot that led the homicidal reopening of schools throughout Chicago. She is overseeing a process which will guarantee the spread of COVID-19 infection among students and teachers and in their communities. In doing so, Lightfoot is consciously initiating a process that city officials know will lead to death. One must also add that Lightfoot has systematically covered up police brutality, overseeing and backing the police force which brutalizes the same polluted working class communities.

Lightfoot, regardless of her brutal methods, speaks not only for herself but for the Democratic Party and the ruling class as a whole. She is a fierce defender of capitalism, exemplified most starkly in her push to reopen schools in an effort to get parents back to their jobs to resume the pumping out of profit.

For its part, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) has thrown its full support behind the hunger strike. Alderman Byron Sigcho-Lopez (25th Ward) and Alderman Rossana Rodriguez-Sanchez (33rd Ward), both DSA members, have voiced their support. The twitter page of the Chicago DSA has said almost nothing of the deadly school reopenings since they were announced, instead tweeting daily about the hunger strike.

The DSA accepts the school reopenings and the sellout by the Chicago Teachers Union, which orchestrated the rotten agreement to reopen schools with the city, as a done deal. By accepting the dictates of Lightfoot and the Democratic Party, the DSA again confirms that it exists as an appendage of the Democratic Party.

Appeals to the ruling class and their figureheads like Lightfoot may at times draw political bread crumbs, but in the end do nothing to advance the interests of the working class.

Such politics aim to convince workers that it is possible to break bread with a political class which has overseen the gutting of jobs, infrastructure, the toxification and pollution of air in working-class communities and the illness of these communities.

The attack on working-class communities, like those on Chicago's Southeast Side, have been carried out by the Democratic Party, which has overseen the city for decades. It is this party that Lightfoot speaks for and represents.

In opposition, workers in Chicago must see themselves as a class and organize as one. The methods of hunger strikes must be replaced with the methods of the class struggle. To this, the Socialist Equality Party calls on workers and youth opposed to the plant relocation to form neighborhood rank-and-file committees and link up with the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the Ford Chicago Assembly Rank-and-File Safety Committee to carry this struggle forward.



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