

Notre Dame lead contamination lawsuit highlights criminality of Paris authorities, complicity of CGT union

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Two years after flames engulfed and destroyed major sections of the 13th-century Notre Dame cathedral in central Paris, including its 19th-century wooden spire, restoration workers continue to work among dangerous levels of lead. The blaze threw an estimated 400 tons of lead from the cathedral's roof into the air. As the smoke cooled, lead caked the streets surrounding the building, where it mostly remains to this day.

Since the fire, hundreds of restoration workers have worked on the site continuously. Moreover, tens of thousands of families whose homes are within a kilometer of the cathedral have lived in constant danger of lead poisoning. Throughout 2019, schools and creches near the cathedral were closed after the detection of dangerous levels of lead on outside surfaces. Until March this year, the square was even open for visitors and tourists to walk through.

In adults, lead poisoning can cause infertility, memory loss, and high blood pressure. In children, lead poisoning can cause severe developmental delay, learning difficulties, seizures and hearing loss. Furthermore, lead poisoning can occur from any contact with a lead-laden surface, meaning that the contamination around Notre Dame was a danger to anyone passing through the area.

On July 6, François Lafforgue of the regional Paris General Confederation of Labor (CGT-75) union, the Henri Pézerat Association and two families living near Notre Dame filed a complaint on charges of “endangering the lives of others.” No defendant was formally named. However, the complaint's text focused on Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo, arguing that “the City of Paris refrained from alerting pupils' parents to the risks incurred by their children.”

The danger at the Notre Dame site and the surrounding area was well-known to union and city officials immediately after the 2019 fire. In the weeks following the fire, Mediapart published an investigation showing lead concentrations in the area surrounding the cathedral 400 to 700 times higher than the authorized threshold. The square in front of the cathedral was closed again in May this year, after a new series of tests detected dangerous levels of lead. Despite this failure to decontaminate the site, however, restoration work continues.

Two years ago, Robin Des Bois, an environmental activist group, filed a similar lawsuit accusing Paris authorities of deliberately endangering individuals' lives through exposure to lead. The suit was eventually thrown out. In August 2019, the CGT itself proposed that the site be closed off and sealed in an airtight cover until it had been decontaminated, but took no other action.

Benoît Martin, head of the CGT Paris federation, told *Le Monde* the aim of Tuesday's lawsuit is to “prove that workers were exposed to risks that could have been avoided, not only on the building site but also around the cathedral, throughout the Cité Island.”

The CGT's support for the new lawsuit is a cynical attempt to cover up its own criminal role in the violation of workers' rights to safe working conditions over the last two years at Notre Dame. Despite clear evidence of deadly levels of lead immediately after the fire, which the CGT acknowledged at the time, the union did not mobilize any part of its membership to oppose unsafe conditions at Notre Dame and in the surrounding area.

While the malign neglect of the Social-Democratic

Hidalgo administration toward the health of workers and local residents is undoubtedly criminal, the dangerous restoration work could only continue due to the critical support the CGT itself. The main aim of its support for this lawsuit is not to bring justice to those responsible, but to save face despite its complicity in the attack on workers' health.

The CGT's response to Notre Dame lead contamination was a harbinger of their crucial support to the herd immunity policy of the EU and Macron in response to COVID-19 a year later. While offering platitudes to workers and presenting themselves as opponents of Macron and the banks, the CGT enforced their reckless and politically criminal back-to-work directives, isolating workers in opposition and suppressing strike actions. This had led to the deaths of over 111,000 people in France, and over a million throughout Europe.

Schools and creches in the area surrounding the cathedral also became dangerous zones of contamination. In July 2019, Annie Thébaud-Mony, research director at the National Institute for Health and Medical Research told *Le Monde* that a measurement of 5,000 µg/m² found in a school close to the cathedral was "gigantic" and "will inevitably create victims."

Tests performed by the Parisian Regional Health Authority in August 2019 found that sixteen children had lead blood levels requiring continued monitoring (between 20 and 49 micrograms of lead per liter of blood), and that two had levels above 50 micrograms, indicating a risk of lead poisoning.

With few discernible immediate side effects, it is possible that many individuals have already experienced some level of lead poisoning, which will have devastating consequences for their long-term health.

Efforts to repair Notre Dame have been marred by controversy from its outset. In the days following the fire, the bourgeois media were full of praise for France's billionaires donating to save the monument. At that time, Bernard Arnault, who has added over €85 billion to his net worth since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, pledged €200 million, or 0.1 percent of his current net worth, to the restoration project.

The Bettencourt-Meyers family (current net worth: €74.1 billion) also pledged €200 million, while energy

giant Total, which boasted after-tax profits of €11.8 billion euros in 2019, pledged just €100 million.

Despite these pledges, and the tiny proportion of these billionaire's fortunes they represent, the vast majority of this money has yet to be received. In June 2019, a spokesman for the cathedral told AP: "The big donors haven't paid. Not a cent."

Instead, as of September 2020, the majority of the €184 million collected by came from over 300,000 smaller individual donors, including a number from abroad. In June 2021, the Catholic diocese of Paris stated the funds were still lacking and that it was seeking 5 to 6 million euros more for the renovation of the interior.

The false promises of billionaire donations while workers continue to toil at the contaminated Notre Dame site underline the irreconcilable conflict between the interests of the billionaire class and the preservation of human culture in the 21st century. Just as the unions and ruling class conspired to sacrifice workers' lives at the altar of corporate profit throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, they continue to refuse to protect workers and Parisian families from lead poisoning.



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