

Toxic fire continues burning in Ohio days after massive, 50 car train derailment

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Work at Norfolk Southern or another Class I? Tell us what you think about Friday's accident by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

A Norfolk Southern train transporting industrial freight through eastern Ohio exploded around 9 p.m. last Friday. Fifty of its cars derailed, including many carrying toxic chemicals. The explosion could be heard throughout the small town of East Palestine, and the subsequent fire lit up the night sky a bright orange, producing so much smoke that it was detected by nearby weather radar. The fire was still smoldering over two days later, preventing first responders from approaching the scene.

Late Sunday night, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine issued an “urgent evacuation notice” for local residents who had not yet evacuated, citing the “potential of a major explosion.” The warning is for residents within a one-mile radius of the crash, where approximately 500 residents have refused earlier evacuation orders.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) sent an investigator on Saturday. An NTSB spokesperson reported that there were three train operators on board—an engineer, the conductor and a conductor trainee—who, miraculously, were uninjured. The train conductor was able to decouple the locomotives after the catastrophic derailment and move them away.

According to the NTSB and Norfolk Southern, 20 of the railcars contained hazardous materials, including 10 that derailed. The toxic chemicals include vinyl chloride—a dangerous carcinogen—combustible liquids, butyl acrylate and benzene residue. No one knows to what extent these dangerous chemicals are seeping into the ground, waterways and air, but reporters and bystanders on the scene reported chemical odors and

the smell of “paint thinner.”

East Palestine declared a state of emergency and evacuated 1,500 to 2,000 homes in the area. School closures were announced for Monday, February 6, as many schools are serving as temporary shelters. Municipal offices are also shuttered and the city council has canceled its Monday night meeting.

Mayor Trent Conaway announced in a press conference Sunday, “People need to stay out of East Palestine. Please!” Regarding a person arrested for jumping the barricades to get a closer view of the wreckage, Conaway said, “You’re breathing in toxic fumes if you’re that close.”

At the Sunday news conference, a spokesperson for the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) revealed that chemical runoff has contaminated a nearby creek, which flows into the Ohio River. More than five million people rely on the Ohio River, which is also a major shipping conduit, for drinking water. The EPA set up containment dams and booms to collect surface contaminants, but acknowledged that some had already passed downstream before the containment measures were implemented. A US EPA agent brushed off the environmental concerns but added, “Things can change any moment.”

The NTSB is investigating a possible mechanical failure. Footage just prior to the derailment from a Ring camera in close proximity to the tracks went viral on social media, showing massive sparks coming off a “hot wheel,” an overheating wheel that can cause thermal cracking, especially given the single-degree freezing temperatures that Friday night. Investigations are hampered by the inability to approach the still-smoldering toxic wreckage, but the NTSB confirmed that a wayside detector went off and triggered an alarm.

Regardless of the immediate mechanical failure, the

true cause of this catastrophe is the insatiable greed of Norfolk Southern and other Class I rail carriers, who have pushed for longer trains with smaller crews who are exhausted from always-on scheduling. A freight train like this one with an estimated 150 to 200 cars can be over two miles long and is manned by a two-person crew, which carriers are fighting to eventually reduce to just a single engineer.

After triggering a global supply chain crisis through the criminal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the capitalist governments have created the conditions for transport and energy companies to enrich themselves tremendously. Oil and gas companies are raking in record-breaking profits, exceeded only by the profits of the Class I railroads like Norfolk Southern.

Meanwhile, over 30 percent of rail workers have left the industry in recent years due to stagnant wages, unbearable schedules, and safety concerns. The rail companies, together with both political parties and the corrupt union bureaucracy, joined forces to enforce a terrible contract on railroaders with below-inflation wage “increases,” rising health care costs, and codification of the hated scheduling practices. After workers in several unions rejected the contract, Congress immediately put aside partisan differences to pass a law enforcing the contract.

Emboldened by the support of Washington and the union apparatus, the railroads have even been violating this slave charter contract at will. Last month, BNSF announced plans to outsource locomotive maintenance to non-union contractors. Machinist union official Kyle Loos suggested in a statement that a possible “solution” to this was forced overtime for union machinists.

Norfolk Southern was also one of three of the seven major carriers to announce pilot programs for one-man crews in the aftermath of the contract, a move which the unions claimed would have been blocked under the new contract. Derailments and deaths are already a daily occurrence on the US rail network, and such a move would inevitably make dangerous accidents like the one in Ohio more frequent.

A worker took to social media to highlight the fact that railway owners never bear the risks of these criminal policies: “Rest easy boys. I just got word no shareholders were injured in this accident. We got lucky!”

The corrupt union bureaucrats marched workers into

this trap by demanding the formation of a Presidential Emergency Board, defending its pro-corporate recommendations, refusing to call a strike when authorized repeatedly by the rank-and-file, and telling workers to immediately stand down when Congress passed its strike injunction.

The only way forward for workers is to take up the fight for rank-and-file control by creating workplace committees and joining these up in a common fight. Join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee today.



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