

Massive release of toxins at Ohio train derailment site following “controlled release”

Samuel Davidson
8 February 2023

Do you work at Norfolk Southern or another Class I railway? 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.

Government and railroad officials released massive amounts of toxins into the streams, ground water and the atmosphere during Monday’s “controlled release” of vinyl chloride from five tanker cars that were part of last Friday’s derailment of a Norfolk Southern freight train in East Palestine, Ohio.

Thousands of pounds of vinyl chloride, a highly toxic, deadly and known carcinogen, were dumped on the ground and then set on fire from five tanker cars that had derailed as part of the 50 cars that went off the track on Friday.

While officials evacuated people living within a one- and two-mile radius of the wreckage, people on social media are reporting being able to smell the chemicals 10 and 15 miles from the site of the crash. Dead fish are being cleared from the banks of streams miles downstream from the accident.

One woman posted a video of her chickens dying in North Lima, Ohio, about 10 miles from the accident. Amanda Breshears told the local news station WKBN that her eyes watered when she went outside and that her chickens were fine the day before.

Many people took photos and videos of the explosion and posted them on social media, along with comments about the smell in the air.

Jim Kosior posted several videos showing the smoke from the explosion covering the area where he lives and called upon his neighbors to gather soil and water samples to be used as evidence. **(Warning: Video has foul language.)**

Breathing vinyl chloride is very dangerous. In high enough levels it can cause death. At any level it can cause cancer of the liver, brain and blood. OSHA (Occupational

Safety and Health Administration) limits exposure to vinyl chloride to just one part per million over an 8-hour shift.

Normally a gas at normal temperatures and pressures, vinyl chloride in contaminated water supply will enter household air when used for showering, cleaning or cooking.

In the air, vinyl chloride breaks down in a few days, resulting in the formation of several other chemicals, including hydrochloric acid, formaldehyde and carbon dioxide.

Weirton, West Virginia, about 40 miles south of East Palestine, switched to an alternative water supply because officials detected not vinyl chloride but a secondary chemical. Weirton sits on the Ohio River. The streams that run through East Palestine feed into the Ohio River.

On Monday, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine and Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro announced that the company would be doing what they called a “controlled release” of the vinyl chloride that remained in five of the cars that went off the tracks.

Government officials claimed that the release was necessary because the tank’s pressure release valves were not working and thus the tank was in danger of exploding.

An engineer who studies industrial accidents took issue with the claim that there was little danger from the “controlled release.” He posted a video explaining the dangers of vinyl chloride and how it interacts in the air and water.

Vinyl chloride boils at 8 degrees. Each tanker car carries between 25,000 and 33,000 gallons of liquid. This means that there may have been as much as 1,000,000 pounds of this toxic chemical.

In the “controlled release,” workers placed small charges to rupture the cars. As the liquid poured out of the tankers, it quickly began to boil away and was ignited by flares that were left lit on the ground, leading to the fire

that could be seen from over 20 miles away.

By Tuesday and Wednesday, workers began removing the cars and repairing the tracks.

One retired railroad worker posted a photo of crews working and pointed to the fact that they were not wearing respirators.

“Unless someone can provide me pictures showing otherwise, it looks like NS has its track employees in #eastpalestine working without respirators. Some of those may be old coworkers and that’s sad. Screenshot this from a news story from earlier”

Just as when the government and corporations pushed for the reopening of schools and businesses in the midst of the pandemic, rail operators and government officials are indifferent to the poisoning of tens of thousands of people.

Norfolk Southern has announced that it will be giving East Palestine \$25,000. This insulting figure comes from a company with a market capitalization of nearly \$60 billion and one that has been providing its Wall Street investors with billions in profits.

Incidents like the one in East Palestine are no accident but are the direct result of the rail operators’ push for greater and greater profits. To further boost profits, the rail operators have been increasing the size and weight of trains and using advanced computer programming to increase the number and frequency of trains on tracks.

On average, there are five rail accidents per day in the United States, a typical year sees over 1,000 derailments. This makes a disaster like the one which occurred in East Palestine all but inevitable.

The rail unions do not operate to defend the interests of the workers, as was again proven in last year’s contract negotiations, but they work with the companies to keep the workforce in check.

The only way forward for workers to ensure that preventable disasters like the East Palestine derailment do not happen is to take control over the safety and infrastructure of the rail system out of the hands of Wall Street speculators and into the hands of workers.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact