

Reporter arrested as public officials attempt to placate victims of rail disaster in East Palestine, Ohio

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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.

In a shocking incident Wednesday, police arrested a national news reporter in the middle of a news conference by the Ohio governor on the train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio. Following the February 3 crash, government and railroad officials had authorized a “controlled release” of thousands of pounds of toxins into the air and groundwater.

The reporter, Evan Lambert of NewsNation, was at the back of the elementary school gymnasium in East Palestine completing a live broadcast as the governor was about to speak. He was approached by local police officers and Major General John Harris Jr., commander of the Ohio National Guard, who told him he was talking too loudly. Harris reportedly told Lambert to stop the broadcast. Lambert ended the broadcast, and then there was a verbal exchange. According to reports, at one point Harris pushed Lambert.

A video posted by NBC station WKYC shows police surrounding Lambert at the back of the gymnasium. Lambert is engaged in an animated conversation with Harris and officers but does not appear to be doing anything resembling “disorderly conduct.” He is soon escorted out by police and then forced to the ground for no apparent reason and handcuffed. This horrified onlookers, one of whom exclaimed, “He is a national correspondent. You can’t do this.”

Lambert was held in jail for five hours and released on \$750 bail. He was charged with disorderly conduct and criminal trespassing.

Following the incident, Republican Governor Mike

Dewine said he had not authorized the arrest but did not call for the dropping of charges. The precise role of Ohio National Guard Commander Harris is not clear, though it appears he escalated the situation. A body camera video showed Harris shoving Lambert. The video exposes as a lie Harris’ claim in the police report that Lambert “was prepared to do harm to me.”

In a statement after his release Lambert said, “I’m doing fine right now. It’s been an extremely long day. No journalist expects to be arrested when you’re doing your job, and I think that’s really important that that doesn’t happen in our country.” He added, “Nothing like this is going to stop me.”

In response to the arrest, many responses on Twitter reflected on the obvious political implications of the arrest. Actor Clifton Collins tweeted, “Rail Roads are very powerful, recently did a study of train accidents from 1930—ending on Nov 23, 1949 Sweetwater, Texas, train accident. Most common thing was the varying accounts in the local Papers, most, written in obvious fashions protecting RR.”

Another wrote, “This happened at our elementary school in my town that was a few blocks away. This was because of the train derailment and the massive fires and explosions.”

And, “suddenly I’m interested to learn more about what’s going on in Ohio—why are they covering this up/trying to prevent journalists from reporting it?????”

The press conference had been called as authorities told residents they could return to their homes following the derailment. The all-clear came just two days after thousands of pounds of the deadly carcinogen vinyl chloride were dumped on the ground and set on fire from five tanker cars. The tanker cars

were part of a 50-car derailment last Friday on the Norfolk Southern rail line through the small industrial community on the Pennsylvania-Ohio border, north of Pittsburgh. Officials had evacuated residents within a one- to two-mile radius of the crash site.

On Wednesday West Virginia Governor Jim Justice said the derailment had resulted in a chemical leak into the Ohio River and that officials in Weirton, West Virginia, had temporarily switched to an alternate water supply as a precaution.

The arrest of the reporter takes place as residents questioned assurances from public authorities that the area is safe given the massive release and that vinyl chloride is toxic even in minute quantities. Concerns were heightened by reports of dead fish and animals in the area.

Despite the obvious dangers, by Tuesday workers were already clearing the tracks at the crash scene. A video posted by a local news channel showed repair crews at the scene without respirators.

On Thursday the Ohio Emergency Management Agency said that it was deactivating its Joint Information Center.

“The health effects, the environmental effects, the effects on waterways, this is bad,” one longtime resident told CBS Pittsburgh after discovering hundreds of dead fish in a stream near their home five miles from the crash site. Their residence relies on well water. “We have livestock, we have horses, we have pets. Is this stuff safe to drink?” he asked.

Another area resident tweeted, “I have NEVER doubted the media/local government so hard before. They are not prepared to handle a situation like this so they are just pretending everything is okay unless the federal steps in.”

“I bet in 2 weeks men in suits will be knocking on doors and writing checks,” wrote another.

“People won’t read the fine print. They will be taking \$\$\$ now. Then they will not be able to be compensated when they and their loved ones are sick and or the water is not safe to drink.”

The callous and contemptuous attitude of Norfolk Southern was demonstrated by the paltry \$25,000 it offered to the city of East Palestine as compensation for the disaster, which led to the evacuation of the city with a population of 4,700 people. This from a company that announced a \$10 billion stock buyback program last

year aimed at further enriching investors while slashing hundreds of jobs.

Online news journal *The Lever* reported that Norfolk Southern had lobbied against proposed regulations requiring rail cars carrying hazardous flammable materials to be equipped with electronic braking systems, Electronically Controlled Pneumatic (ECP) brakes. The updated technology had been touted by Norfolk Southern for its potential to reduce stopping distances by as much as 60 percent.

The rules had been first proposed in 2014 following a series of rail disasters, including the 2012 derailment in Paulsboro, New Jersey, that released 20,000 gallons of vinyl chloride, exposing 28 local residents and the train crew. In 2013 a runaway train carrying oil tankers derailed and exploded in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, killing 47 people.

In 2015 the Obama administration adopted new safety rules, but furious lobbying by the railroads resulted in the rules being gutted. The Norfolk Southern train that derailed did not have the upgraded braking system. One safety expert told *The Lever*, “ECP braking probably would have reduced the damage caused by the derailment by bringing the train to a halt more quickly and stopping all of the cars simultaneously.”

The National Transportation Safety Board said it is looking at an overheated axle as the possible cause of the East Palestine derailment. Michael Graham with the NTSB said an alarm from a wayside defective detector shortly before the derailment alerted the crew of a mechanical issue, and then emergency braking was implemented. A preliminary report is expected in four to six weeks, and a full investigation can take 18-24 months.



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