

# The toxic rail disaster in Ohio: The homicidal indifference of the ruling class laid bare

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The conscious exposure of the residents of East Palestine, Ohio, and the surrounding area to a toxic brew of chemicals in a “controlled burn” last week has once again laid bare the homicidal indifference of the capitalist ruling elite to the lives and well-being of the working class in its ruthless pursuit of profit.

The shocking images of thick black smoke spewing high into the atmosphere and reports of animals dropping dead have spread quickly around the world on social media. The contaminants from the disaster have spread far from the initial train derailment through the air and in water.

The February 6 burn came just three days after the Norfolk Southern train carrying the chemicals, which included highly carcinogenic vinyl chloride, derailed and caught fire just outside the village of 4,700 located 40 miles northwest of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And just three days after that on February 9, residents who had been forced to flee from the area around the wreck were allowed back into their homes.

Hundreds of people were cleared to return despite the fact that there had been no systematic testing to determine what chemicals may have poisoned their drinking water and contaminated their homes. Exposure to even the smallest amount of vinyl chloride is known to cause cancer. When it is burned, it breaks down into hydrogen chloride, an irritant, and phosgene, a chemical which was used in World War I to kill soldiers in their trenches.

The focus of Norfolk Southern executives and government regulators was to reopen the rail line and get trains running again as quickly as possible, regardless of the consequences for the people living in the area.

As hazardous materials expert Sil Caggiano stated bluntly this week, “We basically nuked a town with

chemicals so we could get a railroad open.”

He added, “There’s a lot of what-ifs, and we’re going to be looking at this thing 5, 10, 15, 20 years down the line and wondering, ‘Gee, cancer clusters could pop up, you know, well water could go bad.’”

Norfolk Southern, which reported a profit of \$3.7 billion in 2022, is touting the fact that it has provided just over \$1 million in financial aid to those displaced by its derailment and that it has been conducting in-home air tests and tested drinking water for possible contamination. This is akin to an arsonist boasting of providing blankets to a freezing family after he burned down their home or a murderer being allowed by the police to canvass the scene of his crime.

The American rail companies have attained the highest profit margin of any industry, over 50 percent, by neglecting infrastructure and ruthlessly exploiting railroad workers, refusing paid time off and pushing to reduce the number of workers on a train down to just one. In this mad drive, the modern robber barons have partners in the union bureaucracies and the Democratic and Republican parties. This found expression in the banning of a rail strike and the enforcement of concessions contracts by President Joe Biden and the Democrats in Congress at the end of last year, which the union bureaucracy endorsed as part of its effort to suppress the class struggle.

The list of precedents for the systematic poisoning of the American population in the pursuit of profit is long and goes back to the earliest days of industrial development. Despite the implementation of regulations and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency in the 1970s, the release of toxic chemicals into drinking water and the air continues to be a daily occurrence across the country, without any serious consequences for corporations. This is

particularly true in working class neighborhoods that have been devastated by decades of deindustrialization and mine closures.

In 2014, the water system of Flint, Michigan was contaminated by lead, sickening a significant share of the population, as the result of a scheme to switch from the city's longstanding water source. That same year, 300,000 West Virginians temporarily lost access to their drinking water when several thousands of gallons of a toxic chemical used to process coal spilled into the Elk River.

Other names and events also live in infamy in American history: Love Canal, a working class neighborhood in Niagara Falls, New York, which was a dumping ground for toxic chemicals into the 1970s; Three Mile Island, the nuclear reactor which partially melted down in 1979, emitting radioactive gasses and iodine into the surrounding community; Hinkley, California, where drinking water wells were contaminated by hexavalent chromium-tainted wastewater dumped by the utility Pacific Gas and Electric.

The policy of profits over lives drives the response of the ruling class in every issue, as has been illustrated most nakedly in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in more than one million Americans dead and an estimated 21 million excess deaths globally.

The working class must fight to expose the reality of the disaster in East Palestine and demand that those responsible for the mass poisoning be held accountable beyond wrist-slap fines from state and federal regulators. They must heed the lessons of Flint and so many other disasters: that the ruling class and their political representatives in the Democratic and Republican parties will seek to cover up and downplay the reality of the disaster for years to come. And rail workers must join the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, formed during last year's contract fight, to take control of the railroads to uphold safety over the deadly drive for profits.



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