

Hazardous materials expert speaks out as anger over intentional chemical release erupts at East Palestine, Ohio, town hall meeting

Jerry White**16 February 2023**

Hundreds of residents of East Palestine, Ohio, poured into a town hall meeting Wednesday night to demand answers about the health threat to the community due to the intentional burning and release of toxic chemicals by Norfolk Southern railroad following the February 3 derailment of its 100-car train in the town.

Hours before the meeting was scheduled to start, Norfolk Southern officials announced they would not attend due to concern over the alleged “growing physical threat to our employees and members of the community.”

Residents of the small town of less than 5,000 on the Pennsylvania-Ohio border, northwest of Pittsburgh, were initially evacuated within the one-mile radius of the crash site when state officials carried out a “controlled release” on February 6. The burning of hundreds of thousands of gallons of carcinogenic vinyl chloride and other chemicals produced a massive plume of black smoke that could be seen for miles.

Without any serious testing of homes, water and soil for contaminants, residents were sent back to their homes and rail traffic through the town quickly resumed. On Wednesday, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine claimed the water was safe after state Environmental Protection Agency officials reported finding no evidence of raw contaminants during the inspection of several wells that feed the municipal water system.

During the meeting Wednesday night, residents peppered officials about the thousands of dead fish in local streams, pets getting sick and dying, the persistence of chemical smells and sickness among residents. After the state EPA official dodged their questions and again claimed the water and soil was safe, someone from the crowd was heard shouting, “Flint, Michigan!” referring to the residents of that city whose health concerns were ignored for months before the state government acknowledged in late 2015 that the city’s water system had been poisoned by lead.

One resident asked if EPA officials were testing for dioxins, highly toxic chemical compounds that can cause cancer and damage to immune systems and child development. The official admitted that dioxins had likely been released by the burning but said that such testing was not being done and would

“probably be part of a long-term mitigation strategy.” The official said the state had no choice but to carry out the “controlled release” of the toxins. “Either we blew it up or it would blow up by itself,” he insisted, claiming “that was our only option.”

Earlier on Wednesday, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with hazardous material expert Sil Caggiano, who refuted this claim. In his 39 years of responding to train accidents and derailments, Caggiano said he had “never heard of a railroad company actually detonating their own containers.”

He continued, “I’m not saying it has never been done. But I have not seen it in any case studies, and I’ve looked at pretty much any spill that has occurred, any incident involving rail cars. What basically they did was take one car, which could have blown up and ruptured one or two more and turned it into a for sure thing.”

Asked why the railroad and state officials knowingly risked the lives and health of the town’s residents, he said, “Because the alternatives to what they did would have taken too long and cost them too much money. If they had put the fire out, they would still have had to handle every one of those containers and its content as hazardous waste, all non-marketable, and they would have to have gotten rid of all that contamination. This way, they don’t have contamination anymore. It burned up and it spread over God knows how much. They got off very cheap in my book.”

Caggiano served as the battalion chief at the fire department in Youngstown, Ohio, before retiring two years ago after 39 years of service. He also sat on the state Hazardous Materials/Weapons of Mass Destruction, Technical Advisory Committee, which oversaw the equipment and training of all of Ohio’s Haz Mat teams.

“That plume cloud covered a very large area. I got a picture from an airplane taking off from Pittsburgh, and there is this huge black spot in the middle of the clouds,” Caggiano noted.

Referring to his widely publicized comment that “We basically nuked a town with chemicals so we could get a railroad open,” Caggiano told the WSWS, “The reason I said that is based on that guy’s video of the cloud and stuff

precipitating out of the cloud. It reminded me of disaster movies, where you see the nuclear winter. Everything is falling out of the clouds—that is what it reminded me of. Yes, that's what we did. We didn't use a nuclear weapon, but we did nuke them with chemicals."

Describing the chemicals on the trains and the health threats from burning them, he said, "Vinyl chloride and ethylhexyl acrylate are cancerous. Vinyl chloride when it burns breaks down into phosgene, which was a World War I killing agent, a choking agent, it sinks to the ground and it would go into the foxholes. Butyl acrylate is flammable and causes skin, eye and respiratory irritation, just like vinyl chloride. Ethylhexyl acrylate, another colorless liquid that they use in plastic production, produces hazardous vapors and kills fish. Ethylene glycol monobutyl, another colorless solvent used in the paints and plastics industry, is acutely toxic and can cause permanent injury. It is highly flammable, and again, the vapors can irritate the eyes, the nose and can cause congestion, headaches and vomiting.

"Everything I just read to you are symptoms that people are experiencing now. People are posting pictures of red rashes and red eyes. People that are having breathing problems have left there and gone someplace else. Everything has manifested itself there. And the only way you are going to get rid of it is a deep cleaning of everything, because when you burn anything that has organic chemicals in it, it leaves a film. Like in your kitchen, when you use gas, touch your wall and it's going to feel rough because there is film being deposited as you are burning.

"So, you might not find these chemicals in the air, but are we doing enough sampling to find them? Because you might find them in this film that is all over the place. Are we looking in the dirt in the places where this stuff fell out? I haven't heard anything about that yet. Now, they are finding it in the water. We are going to have rain here in the next 24 hours, so we might start finding it all over again. It's going to wash out and reconstitute. This is a farm community. These people are going to be planting stuff soon, and some of the chemicals may have gotten into the soil."

He continued, "If they find dioxins, all bets are off. Because now we are talking Times Beach and Love Canal-type mitigations. And how do you create dioxins? You burn plastics. I guarantee that was in there. I keep asking are you checking for dioxins, and I get no answer. So, the question is: Are they looking for it? Or don't they want to find it? Because, they know, if they find it, this becomes a real big issue."

Caggiano continued, "I question why there is such a rush to get everything open, everyone's saying everything is fine, the water is okay to drink, and everything has been mitigated—and now we're starting to hear, 'Well, you might want to drink bottled water. We may have found that Norfolk Southern swept some contaminated soil underneath the railroad tracks.'

"Norfolk Southern has their people doing the testing, which is

like the fox guarding the henhouse. Now the Ohio EPA is doing a lot of testing, with assists from the federal EPA.

"They're saying, 'We're expanding some testing.' Well, this should have been done from the get-go. Expand your testing, do everybody's house. Wouldn't you want your house tested? Yes, I would."

Caggiano referred to the doctor from the Ohio Health Department who earlier this week downplayed the health risks by saying that "volatile, organic chemicals are everywhere." They are, Caggiano said, adding, "Every time you fill your car up with gas you are exposed to volatile chemicals. Yeah, but every day, you're not exposed to 20 tanker cars filled with 113,000 gallons worth of a volatile organic chemical being detonated in your backyard."

Referring to the working class population of town, which like the rest of the region has been hard hit by decades of deindustrialization, Caggiano said, "East Palestine is a poor community. We're not talking Mentor here [a more affluent suburb of Cleveland], we're talking more like inner city Detroit."

Pointing to the cover-up by federal, state and local officials, he said, "Everything that I knew would be coming up, and they said would not be an issue, has now become an issue. These poor people in East Palestine are being, what we called mushroomed, kept in the dark and fed BS."

He continued, "This is exactly what happened at Love Canal. If you go back and read everything, they said, 'It's all in your mind. Well, there might be a little contamination. Well, there's a little bit more contamination. Well, there is a lot of contamination. Well, it's okay to live here as long as you don't breach the cap on exposure. Well, you can't live here anymore, we're going to buy your houses out.' It all sounds familiar.

"These are things that make you wonder: Do they know what they are doing, or are they keeping something from you? Are they trying to help the rail company mitigate large lawsuits? I don't know why this is going on, but I know that it is wrong, and everything that I said was wrong is now coming out. It needs to be handled, somebody has to step in and say enough is enough. This has to be cleaned up."

Referring to Norfolk Southern, he said, "The company just spent billions on stock buybacks for its investors. An old friend of mine said, 'Money is the mother's milk of politics.' I'm sure they have plenty to spread around. And they don't give you that money because they like you. They give you that money because now you owe them a favor."

Are you a resident of East Palestine? Contact us, to discuss the issues you face and how to fight them.



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