

East Palestine, Ohio, residents demand answers after release of toxic chemicals: “You’re telling us the air and water are safe. Why are we getting sick?”

Paul Sherman
17 February 2023

Residents of East Palestine, Ohio, packed a town hall meeting Wednesday night to demand answers about the ongoing health risks facing their community after the derailment of a Norfolk Southern freight train on February 3 and the decision by railroad and government authorities to deliberately release and burn toxic chemicals contained in tanker cars days later.

The working class residents of the small town of 4,700 on the Ohio-Pennsylvania border, halfway between Youngstown and Pittsburgh, are outraged over the efforts by the railroad and state, local and federal officials to downplay their concerns. Despite official proclamations that the air, water and soil are safe, townspeople continue to get sick.

Hours before the meeting began, Norfolk Southern officials announced they were not attending the event, claiming this was out of concern of alleged physical threats against them. State police troopers were stationed at every entrance to the high school gymnasium where the event was held.

Fearing an angry reception, officials tried to change the character of the event from a town hall meeting to an “informational” session, where individual residents would have to submit questions to representatives from various agencies sitting behind small tables. They were forced to abandon the plan as hundreds of workers, retirees and young people filed into the stands and began pressing for answers to their questions.

Dismissing the company’s claims about potential violence, one worker said, “We’re the ones who are scared. They attacked us. Why aren’t they here to answer our questions?”

Another worker shouted, “They are afraid of us.”

The town’s Mayor Trent Conaway, Republican Ohio Congressman Bill Johnson and other officials tried to dissipate the anger, claiming they were just as frustrated with the company, telling residents that all of their questions would be answered, if not that evening, in due time.

“We are told there is nothing in the water and the air is fine, so why are people getting sick?” another resident, Linda Murphy, demanded to know. “That is why people are upset. We can’t get answers, all we get is a run-around.”

“I lived 860 feet away” from the derailment, Ted Murphy added. “I evacuated myself and my mother as soon as it happened, and then I had to come back Sunday to get her insulin, and I had to drive through a cloud of this stuff. I thought I was going to die. It stressed me enough that I ended up in the hospital. They thought I was going to have a heart attack. So, what did I breathe in? That’s what I want to know. What is everybody else breathing in?”

An official from the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), in the most complacent manner, began listing chemicals released into the air and soil when the railroad and state authorities decided to blow up the derailed tanker cars filled with highly carcinogenic vinyl chloride and other toxic chemicals. Another worker shouted, “Was there dioxin?” referring to chemical compounds that can cause skin lesions, cancer and liver damage, along with damage to the immune, nervous and reproductive systems.

Murphy’s mother asked the obvious questions.

“What happens if he gets something in five years, if he ends up dead or laid up in the hospital? Who is going to pay for him? He has no insurance.”

Ohio EPA officials failed to convince residents that adequate testing of air, soil and water was being done. One official admitted that no testing for dioxins was currently being carried out.

The crowd was equally hostile to Democrats and Republicans, with residents denouncing Biden’s Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg for not showing up, and other residents interrupting Representative Johnson when he spoke. “I’m not a senator or a congressman, I work for a living,” one worker declared, while another shouted, “Stop taking money from the railroads!”

The day after the meeting, the White House dispatched US Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Michael S. Regan to East Palestine. He claimed his agency would hold Norfolk Southern accountable and advised residents to return to their homes because the water and the air are “safe.” He told residents to “trust the government,” adding “we know that there is a lack of trust.”

Before the town hall meeting started, reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with residents as they were waiting in line.

Courtney Newman, an elementary school teacher, came to the meeting with her 11-year-old son, Shane. “Last night the smell was so bad it was making us sick. We were getting nausea and headaches, and my son woke up with a bloody nose,” she noted.

“I live right in the red zone. We had to evacuate for a week. I can’t put in my garden this year. We want to move. This is my hometown. I was born and raised here. And I take pride in this town, but I don’t want my son growing up here.”

Newman wanted to know why a malfunctioning axle on the train was not detected sooner so it could be stopped before it derailed. She referred to video footage from security cameras that showed sparks or flames shooting from the train’s wheels in Salem, Ohio, 20 miles before it reached East Palestine. “So, you can’t tell me they couldn’t have stopped along the way to address that. If that train had taken out the gas station near our house, me and my son wouldn’t be here.”

She added, “All Norfolk Southern cares about is the money. As soon as they lifted the evacuation, two

minutes later, there was another train going through town.”

Another resident said, “We feel like they nuked an entire town to get the railroad running,” echoing the statement of hazardous material expert and former Youngstown Fire Department Chief Sil Caggiano, who said in 39 years he had never heard of a company deciding to detonate its own tanker cars.

Lisa and Ron, who live less than two miles from the crash site, told the WSWs they were both experiencing headaches, burning eyes and running noses, especially when they go outside. “Someday down the road, when we get older, we may need to sell our house to take care of ourselves,” Lisa said. “Who’s going to buy a house here? What’s the value of my house going to be?” Ron added, “No one is going to buy a house that’s in Chernobyl. That’s what they’re calling us now, ‘Ohio’s Chernobyl.’”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact