

The East Palestine rail disaster and the case for workers' power

Tom Hall**17 February 2023**

The train derailment and release of huge amounts of toxic chemicals in East Palestine, Ohio, is the type of catastrophe that reveals certain fundamental features about the society that produced it.

The scale of the disaster, as well as the levels of reckless indifference by both Norfolk Southern and government officials that made it possible, are shocking. That it happened, however, is not.

Every year, there are more than 1,000 derailments in the United States, an average of around three per day. In only the short time since the disaster in East Palestine, a derailment occurred in Houston, Texas, which led to one death, and another in Van Buren Township, Michigan, which involved the derailment of another chemical car.

The reasons for this high rate of accidents are well-known to 120,000 railroaders in the US. The locomotives, railroads and workforce have been driven into the ground by years of cost-cutting by management. Trains have been lengthened to up to three miles long, controlled by only two people. Because of Precision Scheduled Railroading and similar attendance policies, workers are often forced to operate these massive machines with only a couple of hours of sleep.

The train involved in the derailment in East Palestine, known as 32N or "32 Nasty" among train crews, was long known to be particularly dangerous.

This has not only endangered railroad workers, but the public as a whole. But the more the railroads have been driven to the brink of collapse and the more communities along the railroads are endangered, the higher the railroads' profits go up.

The railroad industry is the most profitable industry in America. Last year, Norfolk Southern reported profits of \$3.2 billion, a record for the company. Rather than investing in infrastructure, let alone improving the conditions for workers, the company has spent \$18 billion over the past five years in stock buybacks and dividends,

that is, handouts to investors. The same pattern is present in all the major rail companies.

Massive resources, meanwhile, are devoted to the ruling class's project of global domination, while basic social infrastructure is starved to the point of catastrophe. The US military and intelligence agencies are financed with something on the order of \$1 trillion every year, while Congress allocates without a second thought tens of billions of dollars to the escalating conflict with Russia seemingly every month.

No expense is spared to devise the best and most effective way to kill large numbers of people, but when it comes to ensuring safe transportation and preventing avoidable catastrophes, there is no money to be found.

A fundamental reality of capitalist society, the basic antagonism between public need and private profit, stands exposed.

And workers are becoming increasingly aware of the fundamental antagonism between their interests and corporate profit. "I'm not a senator or a congressman, I work for a living," one worker declared at a public meeting in East Palestine last week. One resident told the WSWS, "They knew what was on those cars and they didn't care. They didn't care about people, it was all about money." Another added, "We feel like they nuked an entire town to get the railroad running."

Despite significant advances in the science of disaster preparedness, one disaster after another has been simply allowed to happen, with no preparation beforehand and no significant organized response in the aftermath.

Residents of East Palestine have compared their conditions to the poisoning of Flint, Michigan, with lead-tainted water. To this, one can add countless others, including the Love Canal disaster in upstate New York, the BP oil spill in 2010, and, of course, the coronavirus pandemic.

The same basic dynamic is present throughout the

world. The death toll from the earthquake in Turkey and Syria has now risen to a staggering 45,000, with thousands of men, women and children buried under buildings that disintegrated from the impact of an event that was both predictable and predicted.

As in earlier cases, a government cover-up is underway. Republican Governor Mike DeWine tweeted Wednesday morning that the water supply in East Palestine is “safe to drink.” But videos from the area show creeks with oil films on the surface, and even literally bubbling after rocks were thrown into them.

Federal Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg sought to downplay the disaster in a recent interview, declaring with contempt, “While this horrible situation has gotten a particularly high amount of attention, there are roughly 1,000 cases a year of a train derailing.” These and other statements amount to declarations that the government is done pretending to care, and that the residents of eastern Ohio are on their own.

The corporate press is also actively engaged in the cover-up. Major newspapers are now blackguarding all questioning of the official narrative as a fever dream of the far right or “conspiracy theories” borne on social media. One recent *New York Times* article, headlined “‘Chernobyl 2.0’? Ohio Train Derailment Spurs Wild Speculation,” declared: “For many influencers across the political spectrum, claims about the environmental effects of the train derailment have gone far beyond known facts.”

These outfits, which also falsely assert that the coronavirus pandemic is “over,” expect the government’s narrative to be accepted without question.

More disasters and more cover-ups are inevitable as long as social decision-making is left in the hands of a tiny capitalist oligarchy. The selfish profit interests of this layer have been shown time and again to be incompatible with the functioning of a modern society, providing a constant source of chaos, disorganization and outright criminality.

The alternative to this is the organization and mobilization of the working class. The same conditions which sparked the fireball in East Palestine have also sparked significant opposition among railroaders. Last year, workers voted by more than 99 percent to authorize strike action. Workers are determined to fight for decent and safe working conditions, both for themselves and the communities in which they work.

They were prevented from doing so by a corporatist conspiracy, involving both the railroads, the Democrats

and Republicans and the trade union bureaucracy, which delayed a strike as long as possible to try and ram through the deal and give Congress time until after the November midterms to act.

Only days after Congress voted, three railroads, including Norfolk Southern, unveiled pilot programs to reduce crew sizes from two to one—a longstanding goal of the carriers that would only make disasters like what took place in East Palestine even worse.

Now, more than ever, a strike to enforce safe staffing and maintenance levels, and in defiance of the government co-conspirators, would encounter overwhelming public support.

What is involved here, however, is far more than a simple contract fight, but a fight for workers’ control of production. The Wall Street speculators who own the railroads have proven by their own actions that they cannot be trusted with the railroads or any other critical infrastructure.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that those responsible for the catastrophe in East Palestine, including the executives of the rail company, must be held accountable. Those impacted by the derailment must be provided with safe and secure housing until conditions in the city and surrounding region are actually safe, and they must be fully compensated for the economic and other impacts of the catastrophe.

The companies themselves must be placed under social ownership, subject to democratic control and oversight by the working class, and run as public utilities.

The massive corporate profits and the wealth of the capitalist oligarchs financed with them must be seized and allocated to the rebuilding of social infrastructure and guaranteeing high-quality housing and living conditions for all workers as a basic social right.

Ultimately, the fight for safe conditions on the railroads is intimately bound up with the socialist organization of society. It poses the question: Which class will rule? The capitalist class, which subordinates all of society to profit and war, or the working class, reorganizing economic life on the basis of social need.



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