The East Palestine disaster: A crime of capitalism

The Socialist Equality Party (United States)
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The poisoning of East Palestine, Ohio, is not merely an environmental catastrophe. It is a man-made disaster that raises fundamental questions about the structure of the society which produced it.

After ignoring the concerns of residents for as long as possible, the Democrats and Republicans are now engaged in a contest of mutual finger-pointing, attempting to offload their own responsibility by pointing to that of their opponents. In reality, the entire political system is responsible.

Trump rolled back Obama-era train regulations, and no new toxic chemicals were recognized by the federal government under his administration, which was staffed by climate deniers and corporate lobbyists such as Scott Pruitt, his head of the Environmental Protection Agency. But the Obama regulation on pneumatic braking for cars carrying flammable liquids was so toothless—it covered only trains carrying 20 or more such cars—that it would not even have applied to the train that derailed in East Palestine. Moreover, the Obama administration repeatedly intervened in one environmental disaster after another, from the BP oil spill to the poisoning of Flint, to shield those responsible from any accountability.

From successive Republican to Democratic administrations, with only minor differences, there has been a fundamental political continuity: the defense of the wealth and privilege of the capitalist class and the ruthless exploitation of workers. This was illustrated symbolically in the recent visit to East Palestine by Mike DeWine, Republican governor of Ohio, and Democratic head of the EPA Michael Regan, when they went to a resident's home and drank water out of the tap. This was a mimic of Obama's infamous press conference in Flint in 2016, when he denied the dangers lead poisoning posed to children and drank from a glass of (allegedly) Flint tap water.

What both the Democrats and Republicans are seeking to cover up is the basic fact that the disaster in East Palestine is the product of the subordination of society to the interests of corporations and the rich. As one resident put it, "All they care about is their money, their profits, the bottom line."

Railroad workers have long understood that ruthless cost-cutting to increase the profits of the rail industry—already the most profitable in the country—made a disaster like this inevitable. That was a main reason why they voted last year by 99 percent to strike. The response of the Biden administration and both political parties, however, was to join forces to ban a strike and impose a sellout contract. The impact of this will be even more job losses and even more cuts, which will make conditions on the railroads even worse.

It is constantly claimed that there is never enough money to pay for basic social needs such as housing, health care and workplace safety. However, when it comes to bailing out the rich or financing the ever expanding wars waged by the United States abroad, hundreds of billions of dollars can be found by the Democrats and Republicans without a second thought.

In the railroad industry, billions of dollars in profits are wasted on share buybacks every year—that is, it is funneled into the bank accounts of the hedge funds that control the companies. This money comes from ever-greater exploitation of the working class.

The selfish profit motive is not compatible with the needs of a modern society. This has been exposed on a grand scale by the pandemic, which has been allowed to spread in working class communities and has killed more than 1 million Americans. Earlier this week, the Biden administration ended additional pandemic funding for food stamps on the bogus grounds that the pandemic is "over." In reality, the ruling class is over paying for it.

The resources and the technology have long existed that could make disasters like this a thing of the past. Instead,

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they are becoming ever more frequent. More than 1,000 derailments occur in the United States alone every year. One recent report found that there are chemical accidents in America at least once every two days. The water systems of American cities are teetering on the brink of collapse. Jackson, Mississippi, population 150,000, is still without clean drinking water months after a winter freeze caused pipes to burst. And the disaster in Flint, in spite of the fact that media interest long ago evaporated, has never ended.

In spite of efforts to claim that race is the fundamental division in American society, what these communities all have in common are two things. They are mainly working class, and they are poor. Both Flint and eastern Ohio have been devastated by GM plant closures and deindustrialization. Flint's urban landscape is pockmarked with empty lots where factories once stood, and the Lordstown plant in eastern Ohio closed down in 2019.

This is an international phenomenon. As many as 150,000 people are feared dead in the earthquake in Turkey and Syria, but the United States and other major powers, while committing tens of billions each month to war in Ukraine, refuse to release any serious resources for relief of the population of this area, where poverty is the consequence of decades of wars of aggression by the United States and other major imperialist powers.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on residents of East Palestine, railroad workers and workers throughout the US and internationally to advance the following demands:

•First, those impacted by the disaster in East Palestine and the surrounding region must be made whole. They must be provided with free, lifetime health care and testing to deal with the long-term consequences. Full compensation must be made, including for home values wiped out by the poisoning of the town and expenses incurred as a result of the disaster.

• Second, there must be an aggressive program of treatment for the water, soil and air in the region to ensure that it will still be habitable for years to come.

• Third, the railroads must be equipped with the most advanced technologies to prevent future disasters like East Palestine. Every train must be equipped with sensors that automatically inform crews of any possible dangers, combined with regulations that halt transport if there is *any* issue.

•Fourth, all trains must be adequately staffed with multi-person crews, combined with a significant increase in pay and work schedules that allow workers ample time to spend with their families and rest. This is essential not only because the workers deserve it, but to preserve the safety of the public as a whole.

• Fifth, those executives whose cost-cutting decisions made this disaster possible, as well as their pro-corporate accomplices in the state and federal government, must be held criminally responsible.

To the inevitable claim that there is no money to ensure proper safety and compensate the victims of the disaster, the workers must reply that it should taken out of the massive profits accumulated by the rich. The billions of dollars reaped in profit by the railroad companies is a first place to start.

Moreover, the hundreds of billions of dollars spent by the US government on war, in devising the most effective means of killing other people, must instead be used to meet basic social needs at home.

The railroads themselves must be placed under public ownership, run as public utilities rather than the playthings of billionaires and Wall Street hedge funds. This does not mean handing control of the railroads to the pro-corporate Democrats and Republicans, but placing control into the hands of the working class, which has no interest in the profit-driven policies which lead to this and other catastrophes.

Such a program—the necessary response to the East Palestine disaster—cannot be achieved except through a frontal assault on the wealth and political power of the rich. Residents in East Palestine have every right to pursue legal action in the courts, but addressing the underlying causes of the catastrophe requires the building of a massive social and political movement of the working class.

The aim of this movement is the establishment of a government of the workers, by the workers and for the workers, and a socialist society, in the United States and internationally. Workers have been told many things about socialism, almost all of which are lies. Socialism means the reorganization of economic life on the basis of the interests of the working class, which produces the wealth, not the capitalists who rob it from us. It means genuine democratic decision-making determined by social need, not private profit.

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