“It’s going to keep happening all over America”: East Palestine, Ohio residents speak out at town hall on train derailment

Samuel Davidson
5 March 2023

Do you work at Norfolk Southern or another Class I railway? Do you live in East Palestine or a neighboring community? Tell us what you know about the Norfolk Southern disaster by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Last Thursday, environmental activist Erin Brockovich held her second town hall meeting in East Palestine, Ohio. The meeting was organized with several law firms involved in preparing a class-action lawsuit against Norfolk Southern (NS) over the catastrophic derailment and release of toxic chemicals into the atmosphere and water supply in the eastern Ohio town.

Brockovich’s meeting was held the afternoon before a second meeting in town, where residents confronted officials from NS and the Environmental Protection Agency. Anger and frustration over the disaster and ongoing cover-up were evident at both meetings.

“There’s a lot of things that they’re not telling us, so that’s concerning,” Stephanie Malik and Belinda Puchadaja, from nearby Lisbon, told the WSWS. “They’re keeping a lot of other information that people need. It’s all about the money. They’re gonna try to get off as cheap as they can and they’re gonna hurt a lot of people.”

As if to drive the point home, a second massive derailment of a NS train occurred in the state on Saturday, in Springfield. Residents were told to shelter in place while emergency crews assessed the situation. Springfield has a population of more than 58,000, roughly 10 times that of East Palestine, and is the center of a metropolitan area with more than 130,000.

About 20 cars in a 212-car train derailed, including four tanker cars. Officials claim there was no leakage from those cars, two of which contained “diesel exhaust fluid” and the other two “residual amounts of polyacrylamide water solution.”

The dangerous length of the train, at around two miles long and more than 50 cars longer than the train which derailed in East Palestine, underscores that nothing is being done to address any of the underlying safety issues which led to the disaster, and that Norfolk Southern and the other railroads are being allowed by the government to carry on as they had before.

Government counter-terror office brands opposition as “special interest extremism”

Brockovich’s second town hall was addressed by numerous lawyers and experts who presented extensive information on the science of the chemicals released, the naked profiteering by the railroads and neglect of basic safety measures. The *World Socialist Web Site* will report on these details soon. The presentations included 150 slides from attorney Mikal Watts on the role of Norfolk Southern in the accident. He pointed to the railroad’s push for increased profits, which jumped 62 percent in just two years, from $2 billion in 2020 to $3.2 billion last year, based on forcing workers to work longer hours and cuts in maintenance and safety.

Watts revealed that Norfolk Southern alone had 3,397 train derailments in a 20-year period, approximately 170 derailments a year. This amounts to nearly one derailment every two days, at only one of the seven major Class I railroads.

Nearly a month following the February 3 derailment, the EPA finally announced Thursday that it would require NS to begin testing for dioxins, a class of highly toxic chemicals that were almost certainly released into the atmosphere by the “controlled” release and burn of a derailed tanker car following the accident.

Meanwhile, government “counter-terrorism” experts have been far more closely following the activities of Brockovich

© World Socialist Web Site

in the region. Late last month, before her first town hall in East Palestine, a joint federal and state counter-terror "fusion center" issued a bulletin warning that her "placing blame solely on Norfolk Southern" would lead to "[increased] tensions within the community" and a rise in "special interest extremism." The potential activities branded by the report as "extremist" consisted entirely of legally-protected activities such as "protests in/around East Palestine and/or at the Statehouse in Columbus" which called for "for changes in governmental policy."

"We've got no answers, no support"

Residents from East Palestine and neighboring communities spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* on their way into the Brockovich meeting.

Dean and Hannah Leisure live in East Liverpool, about 13 miles from East Palestine, where Beaver Creek flows into the Ohio River. They explained that their dogs and cats are losing their hair and their chickens have died.

Both he and his wife have been to the hospital several times since the accident. Dean is wearing a patch behind his ear for vertigo and his wife has to walk with a cane. They could see the cloud of smoke from the burn which drifted over their home. They are most worried about their 5-year-old son who already suffers from a compromised immune system.

"If you took a tongue depressor and look back in his throat, there's a little tiny hole that he breathes through," explained Dean. "Everything else is all swollen up red and white. He is especially exposed to this."

Kirk Kennety came because he is worried about his brother and the future generation. "I'm worried about the future generation drinking this water, living here and eating the vegetables."

Kirk didn't like the fact that the EPA allowed Norfolk Southern to do "whatever they wanna do that's what they did and now you feel people are paying the price for that. What I saw going on down there at the scene, it's like whatever the railroad decided, that's what we're all just gonna fall in line and do."

Linda Crooks said, "We're concerned for the long-term well-being and also the local agriculture and of wildlife." She pointed out that the chemicals will be entering the water table and wants to know how they are going to move through the ground. "I have no doubt that it had an impact. I'm more concerned with long term effects on us."

She called the response of Norfolk Southern, "willful negligence. I think they were not performing the necessary safety measures, preventative measures. My assumption is that it probably has been what they need to do to have the least financial impact on their stockholders, not the citizens of this little town."

Zsuzsa Gyenes and her nine-year-old son live about a mile from the derailment site. "We have been in a hotel for going on a month now," Zsuzsa says. "We left the night that it happened, Friday the 3rd, and we still can't go back.

"I smelled our house yesterday, it's horrible. Feels like a chemical bath. They've tested our air as being safe. But I get violently sick. I've not brought my 9-year-old son back because he got sick the same night that we left. We've got no answers, no support. The assistance center for Norfolk not reimbursing anything anymore since our air was tested OK."

"Tested," Zsuzsa pointed out, "by [Norfolk Southern's] contracted air quality team."

She says the assistance center is "also not calling me back. It's very hard. We're kind of left in the dark right now trying to fight for answers. Screaming into the void. The air quality people who are going door to door testing homes, they are contracted by Norfolk. Once they test your air is OK" you are cut off from support.

Zsuzsa describes the testing process. "They cover everything, They're not very sensitive devices. They're not giving even numerical values, it's just kind of like yes or no. I don't think they're sensitive enough. People are getting sick with the same CDC symptoms for chemical exposures and they're telling everyone they're safe based on these readings.

"[Norfork Southern] have spent 20 years lobbying against safety features, cutting workers. They knew exactly what they were in for. The railroads workers when they're talking about strike, this is exactly what they were warning about, something like this happening.

"We see the campaign donations to people like DeWine, so why would we trust him? Why would we trust anybody from Norfolk? Why did they leave Norfolk in charge of this at all? That's what I wanna know. I wanna know why they're not being penalized for their violations and why wasn't the train marked hazardous?

"It's gonna keep happening all over America and it has happened all over America."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site