

The Indiana fire disaster: Another case of US industry polluting and killing with virtual impunity

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The sky over Richmond, Indiana, a former industrial city of 35,000 people on the Ohio border, was filled with a massive plume of toxic black smoke Tuesday after a plastics recycling facility in the middle of the city was consumed by flames, endangering the health of thousands across the region.

A voluntary evacuation order was issued for anyone living within a half-mile radius of the inferno, prompting approximately 2,000 people to flee from their homes. Those in the city living outside the evacuation zone were advised to stay inside, turn off their ventilation systems, keep windows and doors closed and bring their pets inside.

It is still unclear what chemicals have been emitted by the blaze, which was still burning Wednesday. However, Indiana State Fire Marshal Steve Jones told reporters that the smoke is “definitely toxic.”

Richmond Fire Chief Tim Brown reported that the massive 175,000 square foot recycling facility had been “filled wall to wall” with plastics and had been a well-known fire risk. “It is very frustrating for all of us,” Brown told local reporters. “... we knew it wasn’t a matter of if, it was a matter of when this was going to happen.” It is known that burning plastics emit a host of cancer-causing chemicals, including dioxin, benzo[*a*]pyrene (BAP) and polyaromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs).

Brown noted that the owner of the facility, Seth Smith, had been repeatedly cited for safety violations and that city officials were aware of the fire danger. “He has been warned several times,” Brown said of Smith. “I don’t know when exactly that was, but we were aware of the situation we were dealing with.”

Officials have issued reassurances that the city’s

water remains safe to drink, and the Environmental Protection Agency reports that it has yet to detect any dangerous chemicals at ground level, including styrene and benzene, two other pollutants commonly emitted by burning plastic.

But residents have a right to be skeptical about official claims that everything is fine, given the long history of industrial pollution and its cover-up in the United States, including Love Canal, the Flint water poisoning, and the groundwater contamination of Hinkley, California. Prevailing winds are pushing the toxic cloud being emitted from the recycling plant eastward toward the already heavily populated area around Dayton, Ohio.

This latest industrial fire in the American Midwest is one in a string of recent disasters, most notably the train derailment and “controlled burn” in East Palestine, Ohio, in February which emitted a host of carcinogens into the groundwater and into the air. Despite repeated reassurances from government and corporate officials, residents there continue to report symptoms of chemical exposure, and tests have detected byproducts of vinyl chloride in people’s bodies.

Businesses routinely pollute working class neighborhoods and knowingly create dangerous conditions in the factories and other workplaces which lead to the deaths of hundreds of workers every year, only to face wrist slap fines from government regulators. The killing and poisoning of workers and their families is seen as a necessary evil by the capitalists in their pursuit of profit. Any resulting fines are factored in as the cost of doing business.

Last month, seven workers were the latest victims of the industrial slaughterhouse when they were killed in

an explosion at the R.M. Palmer Company chocolate factory in West Reading, Pennsylvania. The company had been cited for incidents in 2018 and 2019 in which workers were injured, resulting in fines of just \$13,000 and \$26,000.

Also last month, BP Products North America was fined only \$156,250 after two brothers, Ben and Max Morrissey, were killed in an explosion and fire at the BP Husky oil refinery in Oregon, Ohio, just outside of Toledo, in September 2022. Workers' warnings about dangerous conditions on the unit which blew up and demands that it be shut down for repairs were ignored by management.

BP is perhaps most notorious for the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico which killed 11 workers, poisoned marine habitats and fouled the coastlines of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. None of the criminal charges brought by the federal government against lower level management resulted in prison time, and no executives were ever charged. The company agreed to pay \$4.5 billion in fines, which was barely a dent in its profits.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, employers knowingly exposed workers to a rapidly spreading and extremely deadly virus. States controlled by Democrats as well as Republicans quickly passed laws which gave business immunity from legal liability when workers were exposed to COVID-19 while on the job.

Despite spontaneous work stoppages in the auto industry and opposition from education workers which forced temporary shutdowns and the imposition of limited mitigation measures, the ruling class immediately demanded that all restrictions be rapidly lifted. As a result, more than 1.1 million Americans have officially been killed by the virus, and roughly 20 million more are now suffering from Long COVID.

The union bureaucracies, which falsely claim to represent and fight for the interests of workers, are complicit in this deadly state of affairs. They have facilitated the "profits before lives" approach to the pandemic and done nothing to fight hazardous working conditions, which result in the deaths of 340 workers every day.

As the US ruling class escalates its war with Russia in Ukraine and preparations for war with China, the social cost of war abroad and bank bailouts at home is being

borne by the working class, which is being subjected to increasingly brutal forms of exploitation.

The working class has the collective power to stop the industrial slaughter and ensure a safe environment for all. This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees in every industry, fighting for what workers need. These committees, which are being built under the direction of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), will oppose corporate dictatorship and fight for workers' control over production and health and safety conditions.

The struggle to build rank-and-file committees will lay the basis for a powerful movement of the working class, the only social force which can put an end to the tyranny of capital through the socialist transformation of society to meet human need rather than the homicidal quest for profit.



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