

Residents of Northside Kalamazoo fight poisoning of their neighborhood by global paper packaging company

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20 July 2023

Residents of the working class Northside neighborhood of Kalamazoo, Michigan, have gotten sick and suffered from the aggravation of respiratory illnesses such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), coughing spasms, wheezing and respiratory failure. They have complained for decades about foul odors emanating from the nearby paper mill, which is today owned by Graphic Packaging International (GPI).

In 2021, medical and health experts determined that residents in the 49007 zip code have respiratory illness rates and cancer risks that are much higher than the average in the rest of Kalamazoo. In addition, asthma hospitalizations are higher in the Northside community than in other neighborhoods.

Due to the persistent demands of residents to know the causes of these and other conditions—such as eye irritation, skin rashes, chronic headaches, kidney damage, and cancer—environmental studies have demonstrated that the health problems are linked to air pollution from GPI's paper manufacturing complex located on North Pitcher Street on the eastern edge of the Northside neighborhood, near the Kalamazoo River.

Their experiences mirror those of other sections of the working class that have faced the cruel disregard for public health and safety by the capitalist elite and its government—for example, the lead poisoning of the water infrastructure in Flint, Michigan or the burning of vinyl chloride following the train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio. Northside residents have fought against continuous lies and stonewalling by successive companies that have owned the mill, going back a century, and by the city, state and federal government bodies that are ostensibly responsible for protecting the community from air, water and soil pollution.

A recent air quality analysis by the Kalamazoo city government shows that the people living in the Northside neighborhood have been exposed to excessive levels of hydrogen sulfide and other volatile organic compounds (VOCs) connected with the GPI mill and the Kalamazoo Water Reclamation Plant (KWRP) located behind the paper facility.

Hydrogen sulfide (H₂S) is a highly toxic and flammable gas that smells like rotten eggs and can be detected at very low

concentrations in the air. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), long-term exposure to low concentrations of hydrogen sulfide, at or above 1.4 part per billion (ppb), is dangerous and harmful to the nervous, cardiovascular and respiratory systems.

In the study conducted by the city between September 2019 and March 2022, air sensors consistently detected levels of hydrogen sulfide in the neighborhood that exceed the limit specified by the EPA. Samples taken every month during the two-and-a-half-year study showed concentrations as high as 22.8 ppb, or 16.3 times greater than the EPA maximum, and as low as 4.6 ppb, or 3.2 times the maximum.

When these figures were published in November 2022 by the city's Odor Task Force, Justin Colacino, an associate professor at University of Michigan's Department of Environmental Health Sciences, said that, although being above the limits does not guarantee that everyone will get sick, it is a scenario for chronic illness.

Colacino said that the most vulnerable sections of the population, such as children, the elderly or those with lung conditions, will be impacted most severely, because “the health effects of these chemicals tend to build up over time.”

Refusing to admit and deal with the terrible health effect, the company and government agencies maintain the problem is just a matter of odor control. On December 19, 2022, the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE) issued a violation notice to GPI for “persistent problems with odor control” that included a paltry \$99,000 civil fine and a requirement that the company install “odor mitigation systems.”

And, in another slap in the face, the state of Michigan on May 8 recommended “staying indoors and avoiding exercise or physical exertion” when odors are strong or if people have health concerns. The company itself responded to the citations with hypocritical claims that it takes “community concerns very seriously” and that it has “taken many proactive measures to mitigate the potential for nuisance odors from our operations.”

GPI has received eight similar orders in the past going back

to 2010. The firm has also been cited for emitting nitrogen oxides above permitted levels in 2021 and 2022. Yet, through its extensive economic and political influence, GPI has been allowed to continue to poison the community.

Speaking to MLive, resident Brandi Crawford-Johnson said, “For too long, corporations like Graphic Packaging have been getting millions of dollars in economic incentives from the state of Michigan and the city of Kalamazoo and have experienced zero accountability for the harmful impacts we residents have experienced. This is a public health emergency.”

GPI, and its parent Graphic Packaging Holding Company, is a Fortune 500 corporation that was founded in 1978 in Sandy Springs, Georgia. GPI is one of the largest manufacturers of paperboard and paper-based packaging materials in the world, with 130 facilities worldwide. It is the product of a series of mergers and acquisitions over recent decades that have consolidated many companies in the paperboard and food packaging industry.

In the U.S., GPI operates mills in Ohio, Michigan, Louisiana, Georgia and Texas. It is the fourth largest manufacturing company in the U.S. pulp and paper industry with 25,000 employees and an annual revenue of \$7.8 billion.

At its Kalamazoo facility, GPI manufactures paper-based food packaging products such as cups, cartons, cereal boxes and other containers. There is also a new coated recycled paperboard operation at the complex along the Kalamazoo River which was part of a \$600 million expansion project that received state and local financial incentives and support.

The expansion of GPI’s operations in Kalamazoo, which increased the company’s capacity to 44 percent of the total North American paperboard volume, was carried out between September 2019 and early 2022, while the demands of residents for an end to the air pollution were being suppressed and ignored.

There are approximately 10,800 people living in the working class Northside neighborhood that includes blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians and native Americans. The median income in Northside is \$33,120. This contrasts with the massive salaries of GPI executives. In 2022, the president and chief executive of Graphic Packaging Holding Company, Michael P. Doss, earned a total compensation of \$11.64 million, and the top five executives of the company earned a combined \$25.25 million.

On June 7, a class-action lawsuit was filed in federal court on behalf of a group of Northside residents against GPI, along with numerous local, state and federal government agencies and individuals. The lawsuit is demanding \$600 million in damages for the poisoning of the community by GPI and its predecessors in the paper industry. The lawsuit states that GPI has violated the rights of the residents by “causing them to suffer wrongful deaths, irreparable bodily harm, assaults, batteries, severe emotional distress, and regular nuisances.”

The 161-page filing says GPI egregiously released “hazardous air pollutants causing adverse environmental

effects” at the Kalamazoo mill and it is demanding both compensatory, economic and non-economic damages and an injunction against the company to either stop the toxic emissions or shut down the paper mill.

The lawsuit contains extensive evidence of collusion between the succession of paper companies that have owned the Kalamazoo facility and the government, going back to 1923. It also documents the numerous studies that show the mill has polluted the air, water and ground around the Northside community.

Kalamazoo City Manager Jim Ritsema, Mayor David Anderson and other current or former city leaders, as well as GPI Kalamazoo mill manager Tom Olstad, are all named as defendants in the lawsuit. It also names Governor Gretchen Whitmer and State Senator Sean McCann, along with officials at state environmental and health agencies.

The lawsuit maintains that the company poisoned the Northside neighborhood because the majority of residents are black. However, the reality is that companies in Michigan and throughout the country poison and destroy the health and lives of the workers who work at industrial facilities and the residents who live near them. The motive is not to target a particular race, but to make a profit, the driving force of capitalism.

Only through a unified struggle against the GPI and other capitalist corporations can the working class use its independent strength to oppose the destruction of their health and livelihoods. Fomenting racial or ethnic divisions only weakens that struggle.

Residents should have no illusions that the courts are going to come to their aid and defend their rights. Legal cases generally drag on for years, while at the end, there is very little to show for it, if anything. But the suit has brought out important evidence which should be used as part of a campaign to mobilize the working class politically.

Northside residents can unite with the GPI workers to fight the poisoning of their community. At the mill, there are 750 workers who face the same exposure to the harmful hydrogen sulfide that residents face and work under grinding 12-hour days and intolerable working conditions.

The first step can be to build an action committee with residents and mill workers to organize the fight against the pollution. The action committee would be democratically controlled and independent of the corporations, the Democrats and Republicans, and uniting the working people of the Northside with other sections of the working class.



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