

“We want the Biden administration, the media and everybody to know that we are still here and that it is not safe for us”

# East Palestine, Ohio residents speak out one year after catastrophic train crash and chemical spill

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Residents of East Palestine, Ohio were deeply skeptical of President Biden’s stage-managed appearance last Friday in the small working class community, more than a year after the catastrophic train derailment and chemical spill which poisoned the town’s air, water and soil.

Biden used the event to make a few perfunctory remarks to local officials, firefighters and a small group of handpicked residents. He praised the response and work supposedly done by the government, with vague statements that the cleanup would continue without making any real commitments.

Last February, a Norfolk Southern train derailed in East Palestine, including 11 cars containing highly toxic chemicals, several of which ruptured and caught fire. Three days later, the railroad, backed by the state and local governments and the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), conducted what it described as a “controlled burn” of 1.1 million pounds of highly toxic vinyl chloride released in the crash. This decision, made in order to return the railroad to operation as soon as possible, polluted the ground, water and air for miles around.

While Norfolk Southern, the EPA and the Biden administration want to close the book on East Palestine, residents of this small eastern Ohio community want everyone to know that they are still suffering the health effects of the deliberate polluting of their town.

Shelby Walker’s house sits along the Norfolk Southern tracks that run through East Palestine. She lives just 900 feet from the site of the derailment.

“We want the Biden administration, the media and everybody to know that we are still here and that it is not safe for us. That we are still getting sick. The EPA is saying that everything is safe. It definitely is not! We are still getting sick. Everybody is still getting sick.

“On the night of the derailment a few of us were home. We heard it and we came outside. We saw the fire down the tracks. We came back into the house and watched from the windows.

“We saw that track light up like a fuse. So, we packed up our

belongings and gathered everyone up and headed out. Some of us went to my mother’s. My husband and I stayed back to see if our house caught on fire.

“Now I wish it would have, because we wouldn’t have had a home to come back to that made us sick. All that smoke, we didn’t know it at the time, but it was the vinyl chloride that was on fire that made us sick. No one told us what was on that train.”

Vinyl chloride is a highly toxic chemical used in the making of PVC plastic pipes and other industrial materials. It is a known carcinogen, causing cancer of liver, brain and other organs. The burning of vinyl chloride produces dioxins, a class of highly toxic chemicals which does not decompose and accumulates in living organisms.

“We get headaches really bad, nosebleeds, memory loss, my teeth hurt really bad,” Shelby said. “When I go into the back yard, I get pain in my mouth, my lips feel like they are really chapped, they just get burnt. My mother gets nosebleeds. There are a lot of symptoms that we’ve been dealing with throughout the year.

“It feels like I’m getting dementia. Sometimes I can’t remember, can’t concentrate on the things that I’m thinking about. I still can’t go in the backyard because it is so contaminated.

“My husband has the onset of Parkinson’s disease. He was never diagnosed with Parkinson’s before. Now he has it and he is on medication for it. He is only 49 years old.”

Asked about the role of the Environmental Protection Agency, she said: “I feel we’ve been lied to, they kept telling us that it’s safe to come back. But clearly it’s not with all the symptoms we’ve been having and all the tests we’ve been getting back. The EPA refuses to test our property. So how can they tell us it’s safe when they don’t test the ground here?

“They won’t test inside our house or the soil in our yard. They say they’re waiting until the mitigation is done. What’s the point of that? You should test now so you know what needs to be cleaned up.”

Shelby said the testing was done a few weeks after the explosion. “Contractors with Norfolk Southern came by. We knew that

testing was no good everybody got the exact same results.”

Shelby feels that the EPA is still not telling them the truth. “They tell me one thing in private but then they say something completely different to the media. They need to keep cleaning up and provide people with healthcare for the rest of our lives. You don’t know what the long-term effect of these chemicals are going to be.”

A report from the *Government Accountability Project* found evidence that the Environmental Protection Agency had detected elevated levels of dioxins in testing done as early as February 9 and 17, 2023, but did not share that information with the public or order further testing.

The February 17 testing showed dioxin levels of 91.9, “which is 19 times higher than the 4.8 screening level, which requires more testing,” according to independent testing expert Scott Smith.

“We should never been made to come back here,” concluded Shelby.

The disaster was completely preventable. Norfolk Southern along with all the major rail carriers have been pushing for longer trains, crewed by only a single engineer, with less maintenance on tracks, locomotives and cars. The train that derailed in East Palestine on February 3 was a mile-and-a-half long.

More than 40 miles out of East Palestine, a track-mounted wayside detector automatically notified Norfolk Southern that one of the wheel bearings was overheating on the train. Failure of that wheel is what led to the accident.

Another wayside detector 20 miles out showed the temperature continued to rise, and security video near the town shows the axle in flames. Yet according to Norfolk Southern’s procedure, the train was not stopped.

Many residents who live near the crash site came out to speak with the media and hoped for a chance to speak with Biden or at least for him to see their message. Shelby’s neighbor William Hugar also wanted to talk about what happened.

“I had to go live in the high school for a while. It wasn’t bad, they fed us very well.

“The night the derailment and fire happened I was in the house. It was just a few yards down the line. My backyard is right up against the tracks. We were breathing all those chemicals and smoke. They told us it was safe to come back, but it wasn’t. Everybody was getting sick.

“You can’t treat people like this. All the railroad cared about was getting trains rolling again. You can go out into this creek and all you do is poke the bottom with a stick and all those chemicals float up to the top. They need to dredge the creek and clean this up.

“This never should have happened if they were paying attention to their own safety equipment. Norfolk Southern says this [cleanup] is costing them a lot, but what does it cost the people of this town?”

Ashley McCollum and her family lived one block from the crash site. Over the past year they have been living much of the time in a hotel.

“We can’t go back to our home, we get sick. My boyfriend lost his job, he can’t work with his symptoms. Nobody will rent to us and without any income we can’t get a mortgage to buy a house.

“My seven-year-old son is staying with us in the hotel. It is a nice place, but it is hard not to have a home.

“They know that the air and water is not safe. Yet they told everyone to come home. Nobody knows how bad these chemicals are or what it is going to do to us 10 or 15 years down the road.”

## From Gaza to East Palestine

A group of about 50 people, mostly from nearby Cleveland and Youngstown, Ohio, came out to the town to protest the Biden administration’s involvement in Israel’s genocidal war in the Gaza Strip, and to demand an immediate ceasefire.

“We came here to show Biden that we don’t support his genocide in Gaza,” said Mark who attended the rally with his daughter. “Israel is using bombs and weapons supplied and paid for by the United States to murder innocent people. The United States likes to talk about human rights and freedoms but what they’re doing in Gaza is genocide.

“There are three families in our group who have lost over 50 family members in Gaza. We come from the Arab American Community Center in Youngstown; others are from Cleveland. At our center alone, one family has lost 65 members of their family, another 60, and another over 50. Another person has lost 15 members of their family. This is just from the Youngstown area. We want the murder to stop.

“We are not against the Jewish religion. We are against the state of Israel and the support that they are getting from the United States. We are against genocide Joe and their murder of the people of Gaza.

“The United States says that it is for human rights. But what about the rights of the Palestinian people? They are being bombed, starved and killed every day. This is mass murder, and it must be stopped.”

At no point did Biden meet the protesters, who were kept at a distance by local, state and federal authorities.



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