

Radioactive waste contamination in western New York neighborhood

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In a disaster reminiscent of Love Canal, systematic survey and cleanup have begun of areas contaminated with materials containing the radiologically active element thorium, located in Niagara County, western New York state. These were initially identified by the U.S. Department of Energy in 1978.

A 1981 state report warned about radioactive slag and contamination in Niagara County. The report, titled “The Federal Connection: A History of U.S. Military Involvement in the Toxic Contamination of Love Canal and the Niagara Frontier Region,” identified a number of industrial facilities involved in production of materials for the atomic bomb program during World War II, known as the Manhattan Project. After the end of the war, those companies continued activities that generated radioactive waste, which was then disposed of in various ways in the area, with little or no thought as to the consequences.

The affected neighborhoods are now a mixture of residential and commercial properties. Sporadic remediation efforts, consisting of removal of contaminated sediments from a limited number of properties, has been undertaken by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) over the last decade, but only now, following a 2024 aerial survey that found a number of radioactive anomalies in Erie and Niagara counties, is the affected zone being addressed in a more systematic manner.

No reason has yet been revealed as to why nothing appears to have been done following the 1978 survey, let alone the 1981 report.

The current investigation, conducted jointly by EPA and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), has so far identified over 120 properties with radioactive contamination outside of homes and, in some, inside as well. In some cases,

radiation readings more than 100 times above normal background levels have been detected. So far, EPA has ordered relocation of four families as agencies conduct further testing and cleanup. However, one affected resident reported that no funds were provided to cover relocation expenses, although the EPA says it will do so. The agencies are seeking permission to enter many more properties to conduct testing. No information has yet been provided regarding the possible health effects of the contamination.

The contamination is thought to be the result of the use of radioactive slag (waste material) as fill for driveways, roads, parking lots, yards and beneath homes. Subsequent development of the contaminated area was undertaken without knowledge of the prior dumping or in blatant disregard for it. Those people who unknowingly came to live and work in the area were exposed over decades to potentially harmful levels of radiation.

A recent public meeting was packed with local residents who expressed frustration and anxiety over the slow pace of relocation, inadequate testing and the fact that some initial testing agreements required property owners to waive their rights to reimbursement for damages. Many of the residents walked out of the meeting.

Members of the community have formed an advocacy group, Save Our Backyards Niagara. Their demands include immediate testing of all homes in the area and for the state’s governor, Kathy Hochul, to designate the affected neighborhoods as State Superfund hazardous waste sites to unlock more support and funding. At present, however, the New York Hazardous Waste Superfund program does not encompass nuclear and radioactive waste.

Dumping of radioactive waste is known to have

occurred at a number of locations in western New York. One example is the Western New York Nuclear Service Center in West Valley. Located about 35 miles south of Buffalo, West Valley was the site of the only commercial nuclear fuel reprocessing plant ever to operate in the United States. From 1966 to 1972, Nuclear Fuel Services reprocessed spent nuclear fuel rods there, extracting plutonium and uranium. The operation was a financial and environmental disaster. When it shut down after only six years, it left behind approximately 600,000 gallons of highly radioactive liquid waste stored in underground tanks, along with massive quantities of low- and intermediate-level waste buried in trenches on-site.

Another highly contaminated site is the Niagara Falls Storage Site/Lake Ontario Ordnance Works, located about 10 miles north of Niagara Falls, which is one of the most radioactively contaminated sites in the northeastern United States. During the Manhattan Project and through the Cold War, the Lake Ontario Ordnance Works was used to store radioactive residues from uranium processing—primarily from the Linde Ceramics Plant in Tonawanda, which processed uranium ore for the first atomic bombs. The most dangerous material is stored in an interim waste containment structure—essentially a clay-capped cell—on a 191-acre portion of the site. The radium-bearing residues emit radon gas, and the long-term stability of the containment is an ongoing concern. The site sits near the Niagara Escarpment, and groundwater pathways to Lake Ontario are a persistent worry. Full remediation has never been carried out.

The radiological contamination, which can only be described as an environmental crime, is eerily reminiscent of the equally heinous tragedy of Love Canal, in the city of Niagara Falls, NY. While Love Canal is primarily known for chemical rather than radioactive contamination, it deserves mention as part of the broader picture of how western New York's working class communities were sacrificed to industrial profit. As noted in the WSWs 2024 review of the PBS documentary *Poisoned Ground*, Hooker Chemical (now Occidental Petroleum) dumped approximately 21,000 tons of toxic chemicals—including at least 12 known carcinogens such as benzene and dioxin—into the abandoned canal before selling the land to the local school board for \$1, with a clause releasing the

company from all future liability. Homes and a school were built directly on top of the waste. Chromosomal damage was found in 33 percent of residents tested. The toxic waste, notes the WSWs, “has never been removed”—it remains entombed beneath a clay cap and chain-link fence, a permanent monument to the predatory relationship between American capital and the working class.

In these and many other cases, (and undoubtedly many more yet unknown) US government agencies collaborated with private contractors to conceal the dangers, suppress the evidence and fight the lawsuits of sick and dying workers and residents. The cleanup, where it happens at all, proceeds at a pace measured in decades and at a cost measured in billions—while the corporations that created the toxic disaster walk away with their profits intact.

Governor Hochul has criticized the EPA for not acting quickly and substantially enough to meet the challenge posed by the contamination. EPA has responded that they have mounted a large effort and that Trump administration cuts have not hampered its response. This back and forth is a “blame game” that seeks to obscure the truth. Billions upon billions can be spent on wars but there is little concern and less money to ensure the health and safety of the working class.

Private corporations have long sought to minimize or eliminate the effect of environmental protection measures enacted by government, as limited as they have been, on the unrestrained quest to maximize profit. Those efforts have reached new heights under the Trump administration, which has undertaken to gut environmental protection regulations.

The health and environmental impacts of industrial waste contamination are incalculable. In a socialist society, in which the private profit motive is no longer operative, every effort would be made to eliminate all sources of such toxic contamination.



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