US Army to detonate nearly 10,000 pounds of lead azide in Iowa, threatening lead dust cloud across two states

Marcus Day
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Are you a worker at the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant, or do you live in southeast Iowa or western Illinois? Fill out the form at the end of this article to tell us what you think and for help mobilizing against the detonation.

The US Army is set to detonate 68 barrels of degraded lead azide, about 9,700 pounds, at the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant in Middletown, Iowa, in two earth-covered bunkers in the coming days. The blast could send a plume of lead, a potent neurotoxin, as far as 60 miles, according to the Army.

In the face of mounting popular anger, the Army announced late on Thursday that it was delaying the planned blast, but only by three days, from Friday to Monday.

The Army had advised residents near City Park and Butterfly Park in Middletown to evacuate, warning that the blast could shatter windows, while Iowa's agriculture department has advised that animals be sheltered and that hay bales and water be moved indoors.

The plant is owned by the Army and run by American Ordnance, a subsidiary of the private defense contractor Day & Zimmermann. It fills artillery shells, tank rounds and missile warheads with explosives and it is the Army's primary producer of 155mm shells.

The Army's own modeling shows the blast could create a hazardous cloud of lead dust across an area up to 20 miles wide, from Burlington in southeastern Iowa, to north of the Quad Cities on the Mississippi River, east into Illinois, and on the ground across an area up to 10 miles wide.

Residents protested in Middletown on Wednesday, demanding that the Army stop or delay the blast. "I'm just a normal person. I've never been to a protest, but I just thought that this is something that matters," Jill Holler of Muscatine told KCCI television.

A lawsuit filed on Thursday by environmental groups had asked a court to put the federal permit for the detonation on hold and to rule by Friday morning, the Associated Press reported. The suit faults the Environmental Protection Agency for not making the Army weigh safer methods of disposal, and the Army for the short notice it gave the public. The Army released its first plume map and an announcement of the detonation last Sunday, only five days before the time blast was initially scheduled for.

News of the planned detonation has gone viral nationally on social media, evoking hundreds of angry comments. "5 DAYS…. to make sure you, your family, your pets, livestock, feed are all safe from contamination?!," one wrote on Instagram. "Absolutely unreal. The people of Iowa deserve and should demand better."

Another said, "America's hostility towards its people mirrors the hostility it must reflect onto the rest of the world in order to remain a world power…All of our money funding war."

The contempt and disregard with which the Army is treating workers and residents in Iowa and Illinois cannot be separated from US imperialism's predatory wars. The American ruling class is waging war on Iran, has armed Israel's destruction of Gaza and poured weapons into the war against Russia in Ukraine. It regards the lives of workers at home as no less expendable than the lives of those it bombs abroad.

Area residents should mobilize now to demand the blast be halted. The people who will breathe the dust or children who will consume it have had no say in the plans. Workers on both sides of the Mississippi should organize independently, in rank-and-file committees, to stop it and demand oversight over an alternative safe disposal method.

A hazard left to decay

Lead azide, the trigger charge used in detonators, sat at the plant for almost 20 years, held "for potential production," Business Insider reported on October 17.

In September 2025, the Army posted a notice seeking a contractor to neutralize it chemically. No award is listed.

Stored under ethanol and water, the lead azide recrystallized after temperature swings into forms more sensitive to shock, the Army's decision document, dated Wednesday, says. The plant shut down from March 12 to 30. On March 19, its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Nosse, still promised "a multi-step plan to neutralize and dispose of the lead azide," KILJ radio reported.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) then issued three emergency permits to keep it in place, taking no public comments.

No safe level of lead

Any amount of lead poses the risk of long-term negative health impacts, particularly to children. The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated there is "no level of exposure to lead that is known to be without harmful effects."

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Even low levels are linked to developmental delays, learning difficulties and behavior problems, and the damage can be permanent. A young child can absorb four to five times as much lead as an adult from the same amount swallowed, according to the WHO.

Lead dust that settles on soil, playgrounds, gardens and farmland does not break down and can stay for many years.

The Army's own announcement admits the dust will land where children play, telling residents only to wet-clean play equipment, toys and windowsills afterward.

In 2015, thousands of Louisiana residents petitioned against the EPA-backed open burning of about 7,500 tons of artillery propellant at Camp Minden. Within months the open burn was dropped for a contained system with pollution controls.

The Army's decision document weighs its plan only against doing nothing, chemical neutralization, moving the barrels and a blast with no safeguards at all. It never considers an enclosed system that would capture the lead. Instead, sand-filled barriers will ring the bunkers, leaving a 28-foot gap to vent the blast.

Neither the EPA nor the Army has put a figure on how much lead the barriers will hold back. Its document claims lead in the air will stay below what it calls life-threatening levels, a low bar for a poison with no known safe level.

Seventy workers killed since 1941

By the Army's own count in 2019, 70 workers have been killed at the Iowa Ammunition plant since 1941. An explosion on June 12, 2006, killed Justin Friedrichsen and Steven Upton. Explosions followed in 2018, in 2023, when a worker was burned on the head, and in 2025.

The plant, which assembled nuclear weapons from 1949 to 1975, has been a Superfund site since 1990. A plume of the explosive RDX still lies under farmland to the south.

The Iowa plant is the primary producer of the Army's 155mm artillery shells. Many go on to Ukraine, the Associated Press reported in August 2024. *The Nation* reported on October 21, 2024, that a tank shell fragment found at the site of the attack that killed five-year-old Hind Rajab in Gaza carried a label and serial number traced back to this plant.

The plant also presses the main warhead for the Longbow Hellfire missile, American Ordnance says. On June 2, a US aircraft fired a Hellfire at a tanker in the Persian Gulf, bound for Iran's Kharg Island oil terminal, according to US Central Command.

The war against Iran consumed $22.3 billion in munitions through late June, the Pentagon's inspector general reported in September. In July, ground was broken at the Iowa plant on a shell-loading complex under a $635 million Army contract.

While billions are expended for the production of weapons, a known hazard was left to decay and grow ever-more dangerous the area's population. As a commenter wrote on Instagram: "Wouldn't even have to deal with this bomb if it weren't for war."

The response of the Democrats, who won Iowa's governorship and a US Senate seat in the November 3 midterms, has predictably been inaction and empty assurances. On Thursday, Governor-elect Rob Sand and Senator-elect Josh Turek asked only that the blast be delayed, with Turek proposing a day with safer weather. Nick Salazar and Nikhil Wagle, Democrats just elected to the Iowa legislature, say they are monitoring the situation and seeking information.

Both parties back US imperialism's wars and have been pressing for a massive escalation of missile and ammunition production, which will inevitably undermine safety for workers in the defense industry and residents surrounding these facilities.

Union officials at the plant, for their part, have issued no public statements on the plans. In August 2022, the union bureaucracies blocked a strike by about 500 workers at the plant after the media portrayed it as a threat to national security, with *Forbes* warning that a walkout could interrupt the supply of US weapons to Ukraine.

Opposition among defense industry workers to low wages and unsafe conditions has continued to grow in recent years. This spring, 1,300 workers struck the Lake City Army Ammunition Plant in Missouri over wages and forced overtime.

Stop the detonation!

Plant workers and residents in Iowa and Illinois should organize and fight for the following demands:

• Stop the detonation until everything is made public and reviewed independently: the EPA permit, the Army's assessment, all of its modeling, and why the 2025 neutralization plan was dropped.

• An independent investigation, controlled by workers and residents with scientists they trust, into how the stockpile was left to decay.

• The safest method of disposal, whatever it costs, with full capture of the lead.

• Full pay for plant workers during shutdowns, the right to refuse unsafe work, and safety committees elected by the workers themselves.

These demands will not be won by appeals to the Army, the EPA or either party. They require rank-and-file committees of plant workers and residents, independent of both parties and the union apparatus and linked through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). The fight for safety is bound up with the fight against the wars.

Are you a worker at the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant, or do you live in southeast Iowa or western Illinois? Fill out the form below to tell us what you think and to get involved.

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