Army blows up nearly 10,000 pounds of lead azide in Iowa and declares “success” an hour later

Benjamin Mateus
25 November 2026

At 9 a.m. Central Time on Wednesday, the eve of Thanksgiving, the US Army detonated the entire US stockpile of lead azide, blowing apart 68 barrels and nearly 10,000 pounds of the toxic primary explosive at the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant in Middletown. For the Trump administration and the Pentagon, the lives of working-class families downwind counted for nothing against the need to keep artillery shells flowing to Washington’s wars.

Minutes later, President Donald Trump posted on Truth Social, “Early reports from Iowa are that the Army’s mitigation efforts have far exceeded expectations.” About an hour after the blast, acting Army Secretary Adam Telle proclaimed the blast a “HUGE success,” adding that the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) sensors showed “no readings so far above 0.0.” The officials’ first briefing, two hours after the blast, lasted five minutes and took no questions.

Two simultaneous explosions threw twin white plumes above the tree line, and the wind carried the dust southwest. An hour before the detonation, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had sent an alert to everyone within 20 miles: “EVACUATION IS NO LONGER SAFE OR ADVISED!” According to a WSWS analysis of 2020 Census data, some 473,000 people live within 60 miles of the plant, about 98,000 of them in the plume’s projected path.

Around the same time, the EPA announced that its “real-time air monitors are reporting ZERO detection of airborne lead throughout the region.” But the Army’s own airborne maps, presented Tuesday by Andy Nelson, an atmospheric dispersion specialist with the Army Corps of Engineers, mark only where monitors could register lead in the air at all. Where the lead settles is forecast separately. “Zero detection” means only that the monitors found nothing above their thresholds in the first hours. It says nothing about the fine particles deposited across homes, farms and waterways, where lead does not break down.

The response recalls Trump’s remark in June 2020, early in the COVID-19 pandemic, that “if we stop testing right now, we’d have very few cases, if any.” Both parties went on to make that outlook official policy, dismantling testing and reporting and driving workers back into the plants, at a cost of more than 1.2 million American lives.

The Army’s final forecast projected that lead would settle above the EPA’s floor-dust standard across about 148 square miles, and at 20 times that level across about 27 square miles, while the airborne plume would drift nearly 100 miles into northern Missouri. The EPA permit requires soil and wipe sampling only inside the smaller zone, and laboratory results are not expected for three to five weeks. Families downwind will sit down to Thanksgiving, and possibly Christmas, without knowing what settled on their yards and windowsills.

Army spokesperson Justine Barati had told Radio Iowa that residents worried about lead on their property need only hose it off. “We do not anticipate long-term health impacts,” she said. Hosing, noted University of Iowa professor emeritus Peter Thorne, “will indeed move (lead) to the soil or into surface water.” Col. Aaron Teller of the 71st Explosive Ordnance Disposal Group acknowledged that about a quarter of the lead went airborne in an unmitigated 1977 detonation in Colorado, and the Army never said how much its barriers would reduce the release.

The declarations of success came before a single post-blast soil sample had been analyzed. What took place in Middletown was the normal operation of a social order that subordinates the health of working people to the war drive and the profits of the financial oligarchy.

Before the blast, Gabriel Filippelli, executive director of the Environmental Resilience Institute at Indiana University, warned in Inside Climate News that blast dust and runoff could significantly raise soil lead, while Juanita Mora of the American Lung Association warned, “Don’t think that you’re safe just because you’re a few miles away.” The

© World Socialist Web Site

World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recognize no safe level of lead exposure.

The US Department of Agriculture estimated that about 350 farms could be affected, and Daniel Hummer of Southern Illinois University warned that settled lead could wash into rivers and lakes. Doug Seyb, a 71-year-old farmer in Donnellson, Iowa, could not move his cattle in from pasture. “We can just cross our fingers,” he said. As Krys Plate, a retired second-grade teacher who lives two miles south of the plant, told the *New York Times*, “Everybody knows that the acceptable level of lead is zero.”

The mass opposition to the blast was brushed aside. When the Army insisted online that public health was its “first priority,” one reply, drawing some 11,000 likes, read “Happy Thanksgiving, enjoy the lead poisoning.” The Iowa Environmental Council and the Sierra Club Iowa Chapter sued to halt the EPA’s emergency permit. On Monday, the 8th US Circuit Court of Appeals lifted a temporary stay, and the groups announced that they would not try to block the detonation further.

The same day, Trump announced he had ordered the Army not to proceed without the approval of the appeals court and Iowa’s Democratic governor-elect, Rob Sand, whom he threatened to hold responsible for “any and all death or destruction” if either withheld approval. Sand deferred to the federal operation while declaring that “everyday Iowans are entitled to know how Middletown came to this situation.” Republican Governor Kim Reynolds declared that the Army’s mitigation strategies “have exceeded expectations.” Both big business parties lined up behind the Pentagon, and neither has demanded an accounting of how the Army let the stockpile decay into a public health threat.

The stockpile was consolidated at Middletown in 2009, when, according to the director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, records already showed it was old and degraded. Teller acknowledged that the drums degraded quickly in the eight months the Army held them under emergency storage permits issued by the EPA. In March, according to MuniRem Environmental, the contractor the Army hired, a panel of Army specialists and EPA representatives recommended chemical neutralization. On May 8, four days after MuniRem submitted its detailed treatment plan, then-Army Secretary Dan Driscoll chose detonation instead.

Among the criteria the Army’s Environmental Assessment used to screen disposal options was whether each would let the plant “safely resume its essential medium and large-caliber munitions production mission as quickly as possible.” The “mission” in question is war production for American imperialism. The plant is the primary producer of the Army’s 155 mm artillery shells, and a $635 million complex is under construction to expand output. Washington’s war on Iran is devouring those munitions. The Pentagon told Congress the war had cost $47.1 billion through October 16, with munitions accounting for more than 60 percent, and it has requested $67 billion in supplemental war funding. The people of southeast Iowa were made to bear the risk of the detonation so that the production schedule could be kept.

The Army’s Environmental Assessment ties the excavation of contaminated soil to the EPA’s screening level for lead without stating a number. Last year, the Trump administration tripled the soil lead level that triggers urgent removal at Superfund and hazardous waste sites, to 600 parts per million, and scrapped a stricter screening level for communities exposed to multiple sources of lead. The plant is a federal Superfund site. The hazard left by the blast will be measured in soil samples and in children’s blood for years to come, if it is measured at all.

The social crime at Middletown has exposed the military, the courts and both the Democrats and Republicans as instruments of a ruling class that treats the lives of working people as expendable. The disaster demands the immediate publication of all raw monitoring data; soil and surface sampling across the entire deposition zone, not only its core; free blood lead testing, beginning now, for every child and pregnant woman downwind; full compensation for farmers’ livestock, crops and land; and remediation to the standard of science, which recognizes no safe level of lead.

None of this will be granted by the capitalist state that produced the crisis. It can be won only through the independent mobilization of the working class, organized in rank-and-file committees in the plant and the surrounding towns, and joined to the struggle against imperialist war and the capitalist system that breeds it.

Are you a worker at the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant, or do you live in southeast Iowa, western Illinois or northeast Missouri? Contact the World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Party by filling out the form below to tell us what you think and to get involved. All submissions will be kept anonymous.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site