

THE CARE AND THE FIGHT AND THE FIRE

East Palestine Report Back by Anonymous



Anonymous is an environmental justice advocate and antifascist who lives and works in the region in which the derailment took place.

On February 3, 2023, a Norfolk Southern train derailed in East Palestine, OH, a town of less than 5,000 people, located on the Pennsylvania, Ohio border. The train cars were carrying vinyl chloride, a chemical used to produce PVC piping. As vinyl chloride and other chemicals were leaking and spilling into the surrounding area, the call was made by local emergency responders to proceed with a “controlled burn.” They were acting under Norfolk Southern’s advice.

I am not much of a chemist, but it is my understanding that the burning of these chemicals created dioxins, which are types of chemicals that are bio-cumulative, cancer causing, and can persist in environments for a long time. Since the derailment, people in East Palestine and surrounding communities have been experiencing an array of symptoms. Rashes, coughing, nose bleeds, dizziness, and headaches are among the most common that I’ve heard.

Roughly 10 days after the derailment, I went to East

Palestine to attend a townhall. From there, I connected with NGOs and community organizers who were working to pull together various community responses, be they for aid / relief or political action. Based on what their stated needs, I began working to acquire cleaning materials, trash bags, respirators with acid gas and organic vapor filters, water, and the like. Many other people from many places from across the political spectrum began to do the same, and continue to do so, although with less frequency as time goes on.

As it stands, many residents are still living in and experiencing symptoms from continued chemical exposure. Government response has been slow and inadequate. Decontamination efforts have been limited and largely ineffective, with some methods even prolonging exposure (like aerosolizing a local stream that runs through a residential area). People have lost their homes, sense of security, entire lives worth of material belongings, and are being routinely subjected to dehumanizing and patronizing treatment by company and government officials.

A few hundred indoor air purifiers with carbon filters have been distributed to impacted residents by a few area non-profits, which have been helpful for in-home decontamination. Some residents have purchased whole-home water filtration systems, but these efforts are not comprehensive. Quality, independent, and trust-worthy water, soil, and air testing is expensive and not very accessible. Some researchers from various universities have begun to find funding for various kinds of testing. But anyone familiar with this type of work knows that without baseline test results from before the derailment, new testing only confirms what impacted people already know and may not hold up to legal scrutiny.

What little and limited aid Norfolk Southern was providing to some people is drying up, as they continue to be sued by various school districts, municipalities, and individuals. On top of all of that, card carrying fascists from organizations like Patriot Front and National Justice Party have tried to insert themselves into the situation, taking credit for spurring government action and using half-assed aid efforts to distribute their literature and inject racist talking points into the conversation.

I have been engaged in supporting people that I know in East Palestine and surrounding areas since mid-February and frankly, I don't know how to talk about it any more. It's just an ever present and ever looming fact of life now. And the situation is still fucked. The news cameras have moved on and so have the political vultures, taking the benefits of their presence with them. A completely preventable petrochemical disaster took place within a short driving distance from multiple major cities, but the production line hasn't slowed a bit. The trains are still running through East Palestine.

Norfolk Southern continues to work to secure public funding to alter public infrastructure so they can run twice as many of their privately owned traincars through the Pittsburgh area. Occidental Petroleum / Oxy Vinyl and other companies who owned the chemicals that Norfolk Southern was transporting have gone almost entirely unmentioned in any public conversations about the derailment and have yet to be held accountable. Members of Congress have introduced the Railway Safety Act just months after the federal government declared a pending railroad worker strike illegal. Railroad workers were ready to strike over safety and staffing provisions (among other issues) that very well could have prevented this derailment. And to top it all off, the ongoing petrochemical buildout in the Ohio River Valley and south-western Pennsylvania, which is propped up by the fracking industry, is its own slow moving chemical disaster.

Poor and working people of the region and the ecologies that they inhabit suffer from the effects of emissions, landslides, light and noise pollution, pipeline explosions, plastic pollution, and shit jobs for shit pay while government entities at all levels seem to be welcoming continued petrochemical and hydrogen development.

I am angry and saddened by the social and ecological state of this region. I am livid that human and non-human life alike continue to suffer and pay the cost of capital accumulation, resource extraction, and political-power consolidation. It is wrong. I grieve daily as I watch friends and loved ones fear the very air they breathe. I watch as they become tired and despondent from over-stimulation, stress, and from bearing witness. I am tired too.

I am, however, heartened by the strength that has been found in the outpouring of relief from people outside the region and the spontaneous examples of mutual aid arising in largely apolitical and conservative communities. I am heartened by seeing conflict-avoidant individuals lean into the present conflict and speak their truth. I am heartened to see people begin to analyze power and ask questions about how to develop their own. I am heartened to see that everyday people are so receptive to horizontal and collaborative processes for deciding upon and executing work and action. I see the care and the fight and the fire, and I am heartened. I see eyes that have mostly looked down looking up, sharpening, and I am heartened. I maintain that there is a real and practical reason to hope. I maintain that crises like this derailment can widen fissures and make room for something beautiful to bloom. I maintain that no one is coming to save us or heal us or fight for us, so we have to do it ourselves.

Solidarity from wherever I am to wherever you are. Solidarity to those who work to defend the earth and her children.