

Waste plant polluting southwest Detroit neighborhoods

By Kathleen Martin
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A new waste treatment facility located in southwest Detroit is pumping chemical emissions into the air, harming nearby residents and their children in the neighborhoods.

The facility is operated by New England Fertilizer Company (NEFCO), a biosolids processing company. It takes raw sewage from the Jefferson Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) treatment plant across the street and uses centrifuges to spin the waste into fertilizer for agriculture.

In May 2013, DWSD signed a 20-year, \$683 million contract to become a client of NEFCO. The biosolids drying facility is the largest plant of its kind in the US.

Because the water treatment and processing plant had previously been fined for waste overflow violations, the plan was hailed as a sustainable and “environmentally sound” development by the media and Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA) CEO Sue McCormick. The for-profit company operates in a partnership with the ostensibly publicly owned water authority.

The \$143 million biosolids plant began operating in April 2016. According to an analysis of smokestack data by the *Detroit Free Press*, the plant has exceeded its permitted levels of harmful sulfur dioxide emissions over 2,500 times from April 2016 through February 28, 2017. This is in violation of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) standards for ostensibly acceptable emission levels every hour.

Air pollution in the southwest side of the city, a major industrial hub with an oil refinery, two steel mills, an auto plant and a garbage incinerator, is already worse than anywhere else in the state and the health risks facing the residents are serious. Detroit’s asthma hospitalization rate is three times higher than the national average.

NEFCO’s “At A Glance” portion of the front page of its web site claims that the company has a “socially responsible commitment to public health and safety, and the environment.” On the Detroit project, the site states, “The facility will feature technologically advanced air pollution, noise, and odor control systems ensuring NEFCO is a good neighbor to the community ... Benefits from this contract include significant annual cost savings over the current management practice, capital cost savings by NEFCO providing dewatering at a significant cost reduction versus a DWSD centrifuge capital project that was planned, more efficient staffing, and a facility that greatly reduces impacts to the local community.”

The 2013-2014 Detroit bankruptcy, initiated by the Republican administration of Governor Rick Snyder and backed by the Obama administration, was used to attack city worker jobs and pensions, and sell off public assets. It led to the spinoff of the DWSD to a regional water authority, the contracting out of services to private companies like NEFCO, and funneling even more money into the hands of wealthy bondholders.

Mass water shutoffs have been reinstated to squeeze the working class and poor residents of the city and a multi-national water privatizer—Paris-based Veolia—was brought in to lay off staff and slash costs. This process was inextricably linked to the switch of Flint’s water supply from water delivered by DWSD to the polluted Flint River, and the lead poisoning of the city.

As for NEFCO’s “commitment to public health,” the area’s residents adamantly disagree.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Liliana, a stay-at-home mom to her four children, and her husband Joel, an electrician, on their front porch in River Rouge, just a few blocks from the Jefferson plant. She has lived in River Rouge for eight years and

five in the home she now owns.

“All my kids were raised in Southwest [Detroit],” she said. “We never had a problem there, never got sick. But when we moved here [River Rouge], my 13-year-old daughter started having spots on her skin. The doctor said it was fungal, and sometimes it goes away but it always comes back.

“I was pregnant with my youngest here. My son has speech problems. He’s still a little too young for a diagnosis, but they think he has ADHD. And when he was first born they had to put him on a nebulizer for breathing problems. I didn’t have to do that with any of my other children.”

Liliana pointed to a row of houses across the street and explained the complicated health issues facing former residents in each of the homes, including myriad respiratory issues and cancer. Each house is now vacant following the 2008 housing crisis. “My neighbor used to work for a steel company and he lived there for over 40 years,” she said. “His mom died of lung cancer and so did he. I never saw either of them smoke.”

Liliana and Joel purchased the home from her father after renting an apartment for a few years. She wanted to live near her parents around the block. She talked about how difficult it was to raise a family in filth and pollution, the effects of the poor air quality on her children and her own health. “You buy where you can afford,” she said. “But it’s not worth it here. I would have kept renting if I knew. I’m trying to get my parents to move, too. My parents are both diabetic and I want to be there for them but unfortunately not for much longer because I have to do right for my kids.” She and Joel are saving up money for a down payment on a new home in a different neighborhood, hopefully one with less pollution.

When asked about the water quality, she laughed. “Oh no, we don’t drink the water here,” she said. “If you let the water sit for too long it turns pink. I looked it up and I don’t know why it happens. So yeah, we don’t drink the water until we filter it, and we’re constantly changing the filter. Better safe than sorry. When you buy a house, the inspectors want everything to be a certain way. I mean we even had to buy special batteries for the smoke alarms and we had to redo the pipes. I told them we can fix everything up but if the city doesn’t fix the main pipes then it doesn’t make a

difference what we do in our home.”

Referring to the poisoning of the water supply in Flint, just a few hours north, she said, “Whenever I hear people saying, ‘I’d move [from Flint] if it was me,’ I always said, ‘Well, if that was the case then we’d all be living in nice homes in Rochester,’” a better-off suburb north of the city of Detroit.

River Rouge and southwest Detroit have abandoned industrial buildings and fields, filled with broken glass, trash and piles of rubbish left over from long-closed production facilities like General Motors’ Fleetwood Fisher Body and Cadillac plants. “There are so many other places with nothing around. Why don’t they make those areas useful where no one will be harmed?” Liliana asked, saying that the factories should be moved where they will not be harmful to families. “Why would they do this if it’s hurting people? Why have all these industrial places near homes where people live?”

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