“Detroit Shall Burn No More!”
Incinerator Fight Heats Up

By Jeff Conant

On the final day of the 2010 United States Social Forum scores of local activists and several hundred of their allies from across the country held a series of rallies targeted at the city’s municipal waste incinerator. The Social Forum had chosen Detroit because the city represents all the vast failures of corporate industrialism and immense possibilities for renewal. The closure of the incinerator four months later, temporary though it may be, showed the prescience of the Forum in its choice of target.

Given the wide range of themes discussed at the forum—from immigration to gender to militarism to media justice—and the broad set of issues facing Detroit—from evictions to utility shutoffs to unemployment rates of up to 50 percent—the focus on the waste incinerator for the forum’s closing action was significant.

As the marchers made their way through the nearly vacant neighborhoods of this once thriving metropolis, one chant evoked a complex web of memories. To locals, “Detroit shall burn no more!” brought to mind the 1967 race riots that resulted in thousands of buildings being burned, as well as the inner city arson incidents of the eighties, when property owners would burn down their unmarketable homes for insurance under cover of Devil’s Night (the night before Halloween). This time around, however, the metaphor served to connote the burning of waste and rising global temperatures.

A Fiery Symbol of Despair

A remnant of industrial development that should have been relegated to oblivion long ago, the Detroit municipal waste incinerator serves as a clear example of the ways in which emitters of point-source pollution target low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. It is also a classic target for the growing climate justice movement. Speaking at the rally, City Council Member Joanna Watson admitted that there is no more important issue facing Detroit.

Indeed, the fight over the incinerator—the largest such facility in the country, owned by Covanta, the world’s largest incinerator company—is one of the most iconic environmental and social justice fights in the U.S. today.

The word “consume” means “to destroy or use up, as by fire or disease.” So, incinerators represent the very definition of toxic and unsustainable consumption. They emit more carbon dioxide (CO₂) per unit of electricity than even the dirtiest coal-fired power plants and the incineration process drives a climate-changing cycle of resources extracted from the earth, processed in factories, shipped around the world, and eventually, burned. In truth, more than 90 percent of the materials disposed of in incinerators and landfills could be reused, recycled, and composted, creating both jobs and community resilience.

Like every other incinerator in existence, the Detroit facility stands squarely in the way of green jobs, vibrant communities, and environmental justice—a fact evidenced by the frontline presence of the Teamsters Union at the march and rally. The Teamsters also issued a strong statement, saying, “The facts are clear. Recycling creates six to 10 times more jobs than incinerating or landfiling. By recycling waste we can recover valuable materials and limit hazardous pollution.”

Paid to Pollute

When Detroit’s incinerator was proposed in the
1980s, it aroused strong community opposition. A group called the Evergreen Alliance organized direct actions, including blockades of the site, which led to many arrests and significant public attention. But racial tensions and the strong support enjoyed by Coleman Young, Detroit’s first black mayor, contributed to the failure of the mostly white Evergreen Alliance to block the plan. (Young’s administration, it later turned out, was riddled with corruption and the incinerator is just one piece of his troubled legacy.) The Alliance did succeed on a broader front, however, by raising early awareness that helped galvanize a national movement.

Most notably, Detroit’s incinerator came with a staggering debt load. Clean air policies enacted immediately after it was built demanded the addition of costly pollution controls. And although the city sold the facility to private investors in the early 1990s, taxpayers were saddled with the construction costs. In its 20 years of operation, the incinerator has cost Detroit taxpayers over $1.1 billion; in exchange, it generated toxic pollution causing asthma rates three times the national average.

A recent news report stated: “Detroit doesn’t just outpace the state in pollution levels. Forbes Magazine, analyzing EPA data, last year named the Detroit-Warren-Livonia area the second most toxic city in the nation, with 68 Superfund sites and 281 facilities releasing toxic chemicals.” The cumulative impact of this pollution is literally killing people.

Roland Wahl, a resident of the Oakland Heights section of greater Detroit, states: “We live in the most polluted zip code in the state. My doctor told me ‘this environment is killing you.’ People are selling their homes for as little as $300 to get out of [here].”

March organizer Sandra Turner-Handy, a community outreach director for the Michigan Environmental Council said, “My granddaughter attended the Go Lightly Educational Center, right near the incinerator. She got asthma and had to use her inhaler every single day. [But] from the time she left there… she has not used her inhaler once.”

**Detroit Says: “Give Me Your... Wretched Refuse”**

To operate efficiently, the incinerator needs to burn about 800,000 tons of trash a year; and as long as the incinerator is licensed to operate, its owners must find ways to ensure a steady supply of mixed waste, by the ton. In recent years, however, because of Detroit’s drastic drop in population—from around 1.5 million in the 1980s to about 750,000 today—the amount of trash produced in the city has declined. Consequently, the city has had to import trash from its more affluent neighbors.

Pending the incinerator’s permanent shutdown, Detroit’s inner city residents pay up to $150 a ton to...
import garbage from wealthier areas so that the incinerator can burn its daily quota of 2,858 tons of garbage and release its annual allowed quota of up to 2,251 tons of regulated pollutants.

Not surprisingly, the incinerator is deeply implicated in Detroit’s budget crisis as well. According to Brad van Guilder of the Detroit Ecology Center, “[The] facility has brought Detroit to its knees three times… first in 1991, when the scrubbers had to be added. [Next], when the city sold the facility to a private consortium—it was valued at $643 million, but Detroit received only $54 million. The majority of the funds were actually borrowed from the city, and had to be paid back over the next 20 years.”

The third instance is the crisis occurring right now: Detroit’s contract with the facility’s owners has expired but closing the incinerator now could cost the city more in the short-term than keeping it open. That’s because the incinerator is a Waste to Energy (WTE) facility, meaning heat from burning trash is used to generate electricity, which is sold to Detroit Edison, the local power utility, which in turn sells it to the city. Detroit Edison’s city contract stipulates that even if supply from the incinerator stops, the utility is guaranteed payment through 2024.

**WTE or the Great Carbon Boondoggle**

Incinerators have long been a key target of environmental justice struggles in the U.S.—with great success. Massive public opposition and community advocacy have led to a tremendous rise in alternative waste reduction practices, such as recycling and composting, over the past several decades preventing any new incinerators from being built since 1997. In response, the waste industry has taken to promoting the dubious “Waste to Energy” idea, using misleading claims about burning trash offering a “clean energy source.” Actually, it is an absurdly inefficient source of energy because incinerated waste includes a large percentage of organics.

Incineration is based on the false assumption that there is a large, nonhazardous portion of the waste stream that cannot be avoided through source-reduction and cannot be reused, recycled, or composted. In truth, most municipal waste can be recycled except for hazardous materials, such as PVC, batteries, and electronics—precisely those that are the most hazardous to burn.

“We need to get trash out of the renewable portfolio standard entirely,” says Brad van Guilder of the Ecology Center. “The Obama administration is supporting cap and trade, which will allow these facilities to continue. But if we allow for these cap and trade schemes, we’re going to continue to concentrate the dirtiest facilities in those neighborhoods that can least resist them.”

A healthier and more practical alternative would be the practice of zero waste—designing products and processes to minimize toxicity and waste and conserving and recovering all resources in a closed loop cycle. It would help to conserve three to five times more energy than is produced by waste incineration. “We know land-filling is bad and we know incineration is bad,” says Turner-Handy, who is also a founding member of Zero Waste Detroit, a coalition of environmental organizations, community groups, and individuals working to move Detroit toward recycling. “So we need to have full materials recovery. If the city wants to save money and create jobs, they need to create a materials recovery center.”
An environmental task force set up by the Detroit City Council determined that closing the incinerator would eliminate about 50 jobs, but creating a materials recovery facility would create 123 new jobs, and an additional 300 jobs would be created through recycling-based manufacturing.

However, at present Detroit recycles only about three percent of its waste stream, as opposed to Boston (15 percent), Chicago (23 percent), and San Francisco (over 70 percent). According to van Guilder, the city signed a contract committing the Department of Public Works to pick up household waste and bring it to the Greater Detroit Resource Recovery Authority, which would then bring it to the incinerator. “It basically locked out any kind of recycling,” van Guilder points out. “You would literally be fined for hiring someone to pick up your recycling.”

An End to Smokestacks Everywhere

Recycling is widely acknowledged to be the most climate-effective waste management strategy because it reduces emissions throughout the economy, not just at the waste facility (landfill or incinerator). Which is why Zero Waste Detroit and the other organizers of the June 26 march and rally determined to focus on “smokestacks everywhere, in the backyards of the poor,” and not merely in Detroit, according to Ananda Lee Tan, who is the U.S. and Canada coordinator for the Global Anti-Incinerator Alliance (GAIA) and works with communities worldwide to end incineration.

“To stabilize the climate we need to stop burning oil, coal, forests, crops, and waste,” says Tan. “For most eco-conscious cultures, fire is sacred—only to be used for life-support functions like cooking food and carefully maintaining ecosystems with controlled burns. We need to reconsider the use of fire in destructive processes like burning for energy.”

In October 2010 the incinerator abruptly ceased operations as the owners couldn’t come to terms with the buyer for their overpriced steam heat.

“This facility has never been essential to the city of Detroit. It has just been extremely costly,” said van Guilder on news of the shutdown.

Now that the incinerator has been taken off line, environmentalists are organizing to keep it closed and launch curbside recycling in earnest.

According to van Guilder, this is not just a local issue: “Detroit’s struggle is very important to how this plays out nationally, just like the fight of the Evergreen Alliance back in the late ’80s. They lost the fight in Detroit, but it played out in other incinerator struggles around the country.”

“Historically there are a lot of barriers to organizing different constituencies around an issue like this,” admits Tan. “The fact that frontline EJ communities and their allies from around the country were able to come together with unions to fight this incinerator shows a real shift in the political landscape.”

“Ultimately,” he adds, “it sends a signal to communities across the U.S. that not only can we shut down polluting industries in the backyards of the poor, but we can replace them with green jobs that have tangible benefits. This is a tremendous story that’s still unfolding.”

Endnotes
