

# Detroit Trash Incinerator

Local Papers = Toxic Waste

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Last year when Detroit residents began their protest against the proposed municipal trash incinerator (by demonstrating, attending meetings, putting out informational flyers, hanging banners over the freeway near the incinerator site) there was some local media coverage. But the focus of the coverage was the Detroit City Council meetings where the building permit was being challenged by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). After the permit was approved and since construction has begun, there has been little mention of the issue, even though there have been numerous protest activities organized by residents and local environmental groups.



Almost 200 demonstrators turned out at Edison Plaza  
June 5 to protest the utility company's role in the  
incinerator and its operation of the equally deadly Fermi  
II nuclear plant. -photo Paul O'Leary

There was, of course, considerable media attention devoted to the Greenpeace protest activities here in early June. But Greenpeace is an international organization which, openly acknowledging the overwhelming power of the media and its penchant for covering the spectacular, consciously stages "media events" in order to get its point across. The coverage of Greenpeace activities was not at all positive or supportive. The editorials of the two Detroit newspapers denigrated Greenpeace for its dramatics, and used the publicity as an opportunity to reiterate the message that the incinerator should be built.

Aside from this recent coverage, the only aspect of the struggle that has received a modicum of attention is a legal challenge to the incinerator filed by several environmental organizations, the North Cass Community Union and the province of Ontario in an effort to stop construction. The bargaining point of these lawsuits is the lack of the "proper" pollution control devices.

After over a year of watching the media's coverage of the issue, our initial assumptions have been confirmed, that the media is not at all objective, very often manipulative and irrevocably complicit in the structures that we are confronting. The media creates the framework for "acceptable" social discourse and per-

petuates the elitist dichotomy between legitimate and illegitimate concerns and forms of social action.

In the context of the incinerator, such a framework gives credence to the legal battles of organizations (and there may even be occasional front-page mention of their progress) and almost totally ignores the informal, “unofficial” resistance among city residents who will be directly affected by the incinerator. Thus, the attitude that contributing money to support a legal suit against the city or becoming a member of an organization that

is involved in the suit are not only good things to do, they are also serious, practical and legitimate. Whereas being involved in active protest, taking to the streets, getting together with other individuals in loosely organized groups of residents, educating ourselves and others about alternatives to incineration, actually recycling much of our own waste, trying to reduce our levels of consumption and to be conscious of the waste we create and of its effect on the air, earth and water—these aspects of social protest are usually ignored in the media, and if touched upon, they come across as naive, idealistic, impractical and illegitimate.

It becomes increasingly apparent to many of us, however, that though the legal battles are seemingly a significant part of the campaign against the incinerator, they are also the least “radical” and in the long run, the least effective in getting to the root cause of the waste problem.

Of necessity, they work under the same bureaucratic logic as the city government. Even though most individual environmentalists agree (and the experience of West Germany, where the majority of incinerators were shut down, provides strong irrefutable evidence) that incinerators with or without pollution controls are a very dangerous, unwise and short-term “solution” to the disposal problem, the lawsuits do not demand that the city dispense with the incinerator plan altogether and begin immediately to implement long-range, more ecologically sound alternatives of reduction and recycling. Instead, they take the “politically strategic” position of demanding that the city build the incinerator with the pollution controls (which most of the individuals in the organizations sponsoring the lawsuits admit will not “control” pollution).

Obviously, a somewhat more radical position (i.e., keep the incinerator from being built and begin now to reduce and recycle) is also more practical and more carefully thought out if our primary concern is human health and the survival of the planet.

The media has consistently confused the issue and has kept the basic facts from being understood. By its very form and nature, it can only focus on the fragmentary and the superficial, relying on popular misconceptions, sensational events, and the manipulative language and catchwords of power.

A case in point is the use of the term “environmental terrorism.” Residents protesting the world’s largest trash incinerator, which has been foisted upon them with virtually no warning and with essentially no say in the decision making process, were called “environmental terrorists” both by Detroit mayor Coleman Young’s office, and in a *Detroit News* editorial (April 27, 1986). Such manipulative terminology not only feeds into the international hysteria about terrorism, clearly diverting attention away from the real issues and helping uninformed people to discount the position of the protesters as extremist, but it is also a perfect example of Orwellian Newspeak wherein lies



“Industrialism is the Enemy” says the sign above, reflecting an understanding that the Detroit incinerator is not an isolated “mistake.” -photo/Rebecca Cook.

and truth do a flip-flop in meaning. Clearly the true environmental terrorists are those who are wreaking havoc on the environment, those corporations and governments that are forcing these incinerators on communities all over the country, ignoring the severity of the threat they pose to the ecosystem, ignoring the concerns of residents and environmentalists, while myopically seeking quick, seemingly “economic” solutions to an immense ecological, cultural and political problem.

An editorial in the *Detroit Free Press* (May 16, 1987) similarly manipulates the facts and subtly undermines the position of the protesters by labeling them “environmental purists,” therefore suspect, extremist and not to be taken seriously. With a superior and authoritative tone, the *Free Press* (the supposed liberal voice of Detroit) states that it has consistently supported trash-to-energy incinerators as a “superior method” of dealing with the city’s waste. It then repeats the simplistic and flawed land-fill vs. incineration argument without mentioning that this incinerator will not do away with the need for land-fills.

Although it devotes one almost parenthetical sentence to the recycling alternative, it is important to realize that alternatives are not at all the focus of the article. The true focus and editorial message is that the incinerator must be constructed, that all the arguments and litigation are good and healthy and will help the city to build the “best” incinerator possible.

The media is patently complicit in such dealings not only because of its power and not merely because of the confusing and misleading messages it disseminates, but also and more importantly because it is an integral part of the corporate structure itself. The *Detroit Free Press*, for example, is a big business with big business interests and a high stake in the industrial system and in the throwaway society which encourages consumerism, generates intolerable quantities of waste, and builds incinerators that create energy to be fed back into the industrial complex. Its product—the newspaper—must meet the demands not of individual residents who are concerned with expressing their point of view, but of the businesses, corporations, and politicians who pay big money for advertising in its pages.

Though an individual reporter may be sympathetic to a cause and committed to exposing the hypocrisy and injustice surrounding an issue, the supposed “objective” style of journalism along with the overriding power of the editor (who understands the corporate connections and knows too well the obligations and limitations of a “free” press) will work to temper any zeal or emotionalism and eclipse any message that could be seen as one-sided (against the paper’s interests), extreme, or “impractical” to the continuity of the system.

A certain degree of environmental concern is good for business, good for public relations, for after all who is not interested in the quality of our air, earth and water? And so we will see in the pages of the two Detroit dailies articles about acid rain, the destruction of the rain forests, the extinction of wildlife species, the threatened destruction of Lake Michigan’s dunes, the pollution of the Great Lakes, the toxic waste dilemma. Yet we see no effort on the part of these two newspapers to confront their own involvement in the industrial system responsible for the environmental abuses they report on. The incinerator issue has made many Detroit residents highly aware of the hypocrisy of these newspapers’ environmental concern.

When we think of the complicity of the newspaper industry in the waste problem, we are struck with the staggering number of trees killed to produce the incredible tonnage of paper used in the two Detroit dailies. The *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News* use virgin newsprint, create a huge amount of paper waste, and have no set up for or interest in collecting and recycling their daily waste papers. Only when such a process becomes “cost effective” will they even consider such an alternative. We are struck, too, by the immense amount of air and water pollution generated by the paper mills that these newspapers own and operate.

It is equally important to acknowledge and understand the central role the media plays—through its advertising—in the generation of throw away commodities, and in the promotion of insanely wasteful patterns of consumption. The true newspaper editorials are not on the editorial page, but in the advertising supplements printed on toxic lead-treated paper which is not even recyclable.

We should not waste our time and energy trying to reform the media. Rather, we should realize, and help others realize, its limitations and its complicity in the power structure we are confronting when we protest this incinerator. As we critically examine our own patterns of consumption, we should refuse when and wherever possible to participate in the toxic cycle of environmental destruction. We should scale down our own relation to the media, realizing that it too is a product that masses of people thoughtlessly consume and thoughtlessly throw away. We

are then left to create our own means of acquiring and disseminating information, means that are direct and unmediated. In doing so, we become a stronger community, one that has quickly become sensitive to the insane levels of consumption and waste production in this society, and which as a result has begun to practice what it preaches by reducing its own consumption levels and recycling what materials it can.

Because of our growing strength and awareness, and in spite of the local media's refusal to fairly and clearly represent us and our message, we greatly increase our chances not only of stopping this incinerator, but also of improving the quality of our lives.

*FE Note:* The complete version of the above article will appear in the upcoming Daily Barbarian (PO Box 02455, Detroit MI 48202).

## **Detroit Incinerator Update**

Since the Festival of Life protest against the incinerator in mid-March (See FE #325, Spring 1987), construction has proceeded on the world's largest trash to energy facility at an amazingly rapid pace. The steel-girdered frame for the primary structure is now eight to ten stories high, and a smokestack, at least twice as high, has quickly appeared next to it. Several smaller structures are also going up. The incinerator has quickly become a terrifying physical reality.

But opposition continues in the form of direct action, community outreach, and the compilation and dissemination of information on this and other environmental issues.

The international environmental group Greenpeace joined the protest in June, choosing Detroit as the focus of its battle against incinerators all over North America. On June 2, three of its members scaled the cranes at the construction site and hung banners from them protesting the construction. The following day, two other members climbed the Ambassador Bridge between Detroit and Windsor, Ontario, hanging a sign of protest from the bridge. The group also held a demonstration and a "die-in" at the City-County Building in downtown Detroit.

Greenpeace joined with local residents in their demonstration at Detroit Edison, the local public utility company, on June 5. Edison will be buying the steam generated from the incinerator and also operates the nearby Fermi 2 nuclear power reactor, which is ranked as one of the country's poorest functioning facilities.

Canadian residents have been involved in many of these activities and have organized several events of their own, including a mid-June riverfront concert in Windsor where the Layabouts from Detroit, and Luxury Christ and Dead Gurus from Windsor performed.

On July 1, Windsor and Detroit residents held a "Cycle Recycle" protest. People brought newspapers and glass for recycling centers, and then some fifty people on bicycles decorated with balloons, banners and signs protesting the incinerator, rode through Detroit and across the Ambassador Bridge into Windsor in a two-wheeled, international protest.

A recently proposed ruling by the Environmental Protection Agency that will require all new municipal incinerators to install the most "up-to-date" pollution control devices may affect the Detroit facility, forcing the City to add the baghouse and acid scrubbers that some (like the *Detroit Free Press* and the United Auto Workers), prefer to see built with the incinerator. Of course, this development would undercut the environmental groups law suit and quiet much of the opposition both in Detroit and Canada. It would be sold as the "appropriate compromise," and the facility would be completed and put into operation.

But the question is not one form of "pollution control" technology versus another. Whatever the pollution technology they apply, the incinerator will spew out millions of tons of acids, heavy metals, and dioxins and furans. It is the incinerator (and the industrial way of life) that must be stopped; choosing one design over another is like having a choice in the cancer that kills us. Stop the incinerator!

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# fifth Estate

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