

Detroit Incinerator Now Part of Landscape

Evergreen Alliance in Semi-Coma

Lewis Cannon

The Detroit trash incinerator, focus of years of opposition in the community, continues to operate in spite of numerous technical, legal and financial problems. Since last Winter, the City of Detroit has been involved in negotiations to sell the facility to Phillip Morris Capital Co., part of the cigarette manufacturer's commercial empire, in exchange for a complicated series of tax breaks. The \$600 million complex would go to Phillip Morris for \$51 million, but it would be leased by the incinerator authority and Combustion Engineering, which constructed and operates it. In exchange for the lease, Phillip Morris could claim tax write-offs for depreciation and credits for investment—a fancy shell game which would ultimately make the city taxpayers responsible for any failure.

In the Spring of 1991, the Michigan Air Pollution Control Commission (MAPCC) gave the incinerator authority permission to continue to exceed pollution limits (particularly on mercury, which has consistently plagued operations), and to manipulate amounts of trash burned, as well as the process by which it is burned, so as to operate commercially and thus facilitate the sale to Phillip Morris.

This classic dirty deal precipitated a law suit by local residents (including some members of the community-based anti-incinerator group the Evergreen Alliance) against the MAPCC, the City, Combustion Engineering and the City of Detroit on the grounds that the agreement was made on economic rather than environmental grounds, constituting a conspiracy to violate the charge of the environmental commission. The irony of Phillip Morris' desire to buy the incinerator—a kind of pyramid S&L-style scheme to make money out of nothing while getting revenge on nonsmokers—is a corporate coup de grace not lost on local residents, who have talked of painting the 237-foot smokestack to look like a giant cigarette.

Meanwhile, the Evergreen Alliance, which in the past has been exemplary for its creative direct action and community solidarity, has slipped into a semi-coma, evidenced by lack of attendance at meetings and energy among its core for repeating some of the strategies of two and three years ago. This is in part because the activist core always considered the Evergreen Alliance a direct-action group, not an ongoing institutionalized organization that would undertake long-term bureaucratic legal and political challenges (which for the time being seem to be the only avenues left open to incinerator opponents outside of going to Libya for rocket launchers).

A “Naturalized” Feature of the Landscape

Other activities are going on, such as the lawsuit and further attempts to make links with various suburban and city anti-incineration groups (such as a day of protest in early August by a new coalition, People United Against Incineration), but these are being carried by a handful of people. The fact is that in the Detroit area, the anti-incinerator drive is at an all-time low. As opponents have run out of options, the facility in Detroit has become established through government legitimation, “naturalized” as a permanent feature of the physical and social landscape. Life, such as it is, can go on in the shadow (and the plume) of the trash incinerator. It's only another increment—a

huge one, to be sure, but invisible in its worst aspects—in an industrial nightmare. The incinerator, once a potent emblem of all the assaults and insults of industrial daily life, has now tended to become just another assault, another insult in a series of never-ending outrages.

Interestingly, this development follows a pattern disclosed by sociologist Michael Edelstein in his study of community-based anti-toxics struggles, *Contaminated Communities: The Social and Psychological impacts of Residential Toxic Exposure* (West-view Press, 1988). Edelstein's research in several communities revealed that most struggles fall into two stages. When a facility is first proposed, sited and built, opposition emerges in the local community. If this opposition fails to halt the project, which is frequently the case (though the anti-toxics movement has had its victories, usually when opposition started early before the legal and bureaucratic foundations were fully laid, which was not the case in Detroit), the original group tends to fold as the facility begins to operate. Only later, when it is discovered that the community has been seriously contaminated or when some "accident" of large proportions occurs, does a second wave emerge, in which old and new elements renew the battle on a new level. We seem to be at the close of the first stage.

It's no consolation to anticipate the second stage—if that comes. I'm reminded of an interview I gave to independent filmmakers documenting our fight a few years ago, after the incinerator had managed to stymie us and to skate on several serious technical violations. "They got their way for now," I said, bitterly. "People are going to have to start dropping dead I guess before they see how much we need to shut this thing down." I didn't realize how right I was. Whether or not enough people will drop dead, and in dramatic enough a manner, for more spontaneous, organic community-based resistance to come about is an open question. But as long as the incinerator appears to be only an insult and a nuisance, and people (and the land) continue to do their dying in private, it's with us for the time being.

War A Double Whammy

The war didn't help matters, either. For the rulers of U\$ corporate capital, it provided a double whammy bonus, knocking out and splitting grassroots groups as it renewed military power and imperial allegiance. The group, to its credit, put its energy into opposing the war. It seemed pretty ridiculous to continue to focus on a trash incinerator with the U.S. war machine (the U.S. is a war machine, actually) pulverizing a whole region of the planet and wreaking global havoc. Fighting the war took up all our energies; when the war ended, people found themselves reassessing our efforts—the war demonstrated that conditions are far worse than even we thought. A discussion at an Evergreen meeting on possible actions led to the idea of leafleting the Grand Prix (a road race through downtown Detroit), which then turned into a discussion about disrupting the race itself as representative, even more than the incinerator, of all the evils of industrial-extermist society. But the idea of a handful of people trying somehow to draw connections between oil-soaked, Roman circus-style road races, ecological destruction and imperial war before hundreds of thousands of drunken race fans seemed overwhelming. Nothing was organized, and we did not even schedule another meeting.

None of this means that our activist core has collapsed, only that people are gathering lost energy and, through the limited means available to us, trying to find ways to express the larger picture that encompasses empire, war and ecological apocalypse. Nor does it mean that we did not accomplish much or that our activities failed. We learned a lot, achieved a lot. Given that the incinerator was already well on its way to being built when we started fighting it in 1986, we actually have done more to impede its smooth functioning than we originally thought we could. And we never had any illusions about becoming an established environmental organization—nor did we have the desire. The group has functioned as the conditions for it necessitated, and will function again as the need or possibility for action arises, or perhaps will be superseded by other, broader projects.

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