The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) says it will move families back into homes in contaminated neighborhoods at Love Canal, near Niagara Falls, New York, this summer. We are asking our readers to take immediate action to prevent this wrong: We ask you to write two letters. Here's why it is important:

The EPA plans to rename Love Canal “Sunrise City,” so “Love Canal” will disappear from America’s vocabulary. It is a move calculated to eradicate the major symbol of corporate stupidity and greed that launched the grass roots movement for environmental justice back in 1980, when housewife Lois Gibbs gathered her courage, rallied her neighbors, fought a bitter struggle for her children’s lives, and forced the phrase “toxic waste” onto evening TV newsscreens across America.

As a direct result of a terrific fight waged by Lois and her neighbors in the late ’70s, President Jimmy Carter in 1980 responded to pressure in a human way, and the federal government bought 235 homes and moved the families out. Now the federal government, and many state governments, are facing similar demands all across the country: People living near toxic chemical dumps are demanding to be bought out and relocated. After nearly a decade of eyewash and promises, it has become clear that the Superfund program to clean up 1000 chemical dumps isn’t going anywhere. The EPA has not been able to clean up Superfund dumps because cleanup technology really doesn’t exist, at least not for the sums of money the EPA is willing to spend, so people are demanding to be moved out, relocated, resettled. They want the terror to stop, they want their children’s health given back, they want peace of mind. In short, they want environmental justice.

For its part, the federal government hopes to dig in its heels and stonewall. If they succeed, thousands of families across America will be the losers. It will become harder and harder to argue for relocation. More and more people will find themselves trapped permanently next to toxic dumps, their children suffering rashes and abdominal pain and seizures and headaches and diminished ability to learn, the measurable effects of chemical exposures. It is a cruel prospect, hardly American at all—more in line with public policies we associate with totalitarian societies.

To pull off this cruel shift in public policy, the EPA must rewrite history and declare Love Canal habitable. (We note that the EPA never refers to Love Canal as “safe.” They say only, in carefully-worded press releases, that it has been declared “habitabile.”)

Without exactly saying so, the EPA wants to establish a precedent, that people poor enough and unlucky enough to live near a dump are just out of chips, that’s all. Too bad. The implication is that real Americans will learn to live with chemical dumps; only wimps and cry babies would even want to be relocated.

And what more important place to establish this precedent than at Love Canal itself? Love Canal is a place where human babies were sacrificed to the chemical industry. The health damage to those children has been documented more than once. The first health study completed by the state of New York revealed that 56% of the children living along Love Canal itself were born with birth defects. Longer-term studies of a larger number of children have shown that the effects of the Canal extended into other neighborhoods besides the homes fronting directly on the dump. These studies have shown that low birth weight babies were 2.3 times as likely to occur among homeowners living near Love Canal, compared to a control group living elsewhere in Niagara Falls. (11.1% vs. 4.8%). Serious birth defects were twice as likely to occur among those living near the Canal (12.1% vs. 6.2%). These studies found seizures 2.5 times as prevalent among Love Canal kids as among controls; learning disabilities were 1.5 times as prevalent; hyperactivity was almost 3 times as prevalent; eye irritation was twice as prevalent; skin rashes occurred twice as often; abdominal pain was twice as prevalent; incontinence occurred three times as often. Thus by seven health measures, living near Love Canal is associated with sickness among children. (For more details, see RHWN #104.)

But Love Canal has been cleaned up, hasn’t it? LOVE CANAL HAS NOT BEEN CLEANED UP AT ALL. A clay cap has been placed over the worst contamination, but the chemical wastes that seeped into Lois’s basement are still in the ground, a toxic time bomb waiting to kill and maim future generations of children. The EPA is unwilling to spend the kind of money it would take to clean the place up. Worst of all, they are not even willing to force industry to spend the money to clean up its own mess. Instead, they want to “solve” the problem by linguistic trickery—declare the place “habitable,” give it a new name that makes it sound like a Florida resort, and hope that no one remembers the awful truth about what happened there.

This is a dark day indeed. The EPA is even using bastardized science to justify this public relations stunt. The agency hired scientists who compared the Love Canal neighborhood to two inner-city neighborhoods in Niagara County, which are themselves contaminated. One of these “control” neighborhoods is actually contaminated by some of the same wastes as Love Canal, presumably dumped by the same company—Occidental Petroleum. These scientists found few differences in the levels of chemicals measured in the three neighborhoods, and on that basis they have declared Love Canal “habitable.” Given the Health Data FROM LOVE CANAL, THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN MORE justifiable in declaring the other two neighborhoods “UNINHABITABLE.” But what would the Mayor, the Board of Realtors, the Chamber of Commerce, and Occidental Petroleum have said about that? The scientists reached the conclusion that EPA, local boosters and the polluters needed.

Worse yet, these scientists compared Love Canal to two other neighborhoods outside the area and found Love Canal significantly more contaminated than these other two “control” areas, but THEY CHOSE TO IGNORE THESE DATA ENTIRELY. This is science in the service of propaganda.

Now the EPA plans to move poor and blue collar families into the homes that were originally abandoned. (The most contaminated of those original homes were bulldozed; the remaining ones are less contaminated, but health damage has been recorded among some of the families who inhabited the homes EPA now wants to open up again.) New families will be sacrificed to the god Progress Through Chemistry.

Lois herself is now leading the fight to stop this travesty. Lois is asking—and we are asking—everyone to write two letters, one to William Reilly, Administrator of U.S. EPA [401 M Street, SW, Washington, DC 20002], and one to Governor Mario Cuomo [State Capitol, Albany, NY 12224]. But PLEASE DO NOT MAIL YOUR LETTERS TO THESE GENTLEMAN—mail them to Lois Gibbs, P.O. Box 926, Arlington, Va 22216. Lois will get them into the hands of Mr. Reilly and Mr. Cuomo in some creative way this summer, as part of a strategy to stop the reinhabiting of Love Canal.

--Peter Montague

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