Introduction

In Illinois low income and communities of color continue to endure health disparities and experiences of environmental racism. In southern Illinois the rapid expansion of the hydraulic fracting industry threatens rural areas including indigenous communities near East St. Louis. Despite closures in the past two years, coal power plants in places such as Waukegan continue to contaminate waterways and produce high rates of respiratory illnesses in nearby black and brown communities. Recent population shifts between the city of Chicago and suburban areas has meant that environmental racism is now a metropolitan and statewide concern.

Though “sustainability” is now institutionalized, communities of color in Chicago remain vulnerable to egregious environmental injustices caused by polluting industries. In south Chicago the failure of the state to regulate the process of refining tar sands has meant that a byproduct known as petcoke is polluting the air and waterways and creating serious concerns for community health in nearby neighborhoods. In the past few months, a proposed metal recycler to be located across the street from a majority Latino high school in the Pilsen neighborhood also highlights the existence of environmental racism in Chicago. Unfortunately, though local activists throughout the state have waged important struggles to prevent environmental injustices, local governments have continued to support job creation and cater to industry needs.

Waukegan Coal Plant and Pollution

Midwest Generation’s Waukegan coal-fired power plant, located in Lake County on the shore of Lake Michigan, is one of the nation’s oldest coal plants. Originally built in 1923 and currently using boilers over 50 years old, its two outdated operating unit’s burn coal and pollute Lake County. While the coal plant has modest pollution controls installed to reduce high levels of toxic nitrogen oxide and mercury emissions, it is still the largest emitter of sulfur dioxide, a major contributor to particulate matter, and mercury in Lake County according to the Illinois EPA. Currently, the air quality in Lake County does not meet the national standard for permissible levels of fine particulate matter that is deemed “safe.”

The pollution from coal-fired power plants has significant impacts on human health. Emissions from coal plants include dangerous toxins like carbon dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide and mercury. Pollution affects Lake County’s delicate water resources, especially Lake Michigan. Just one gram of mercury is enough to contaminate a 20 acre lake making fish unsafe to eat. The Waukegan power plant emits almost 100 lbs of mercury each year. When mercury from coal plants falls into waterways, it accumulates in plants, organisms and fish up the food
chain. The neurotoxin can cause serious developmental impairment in fetuses and children, and at higher concentrations it can damage the nervous system and organs of adults. The popularity of fishing near the Waukegan coal plant puts Lake County residents in direct risk of ingesting mercury.

As Midwest Generation’s parent company, Edison Mission Energy, states on its own website, most of the power produced from its Waukegan and other Illinois plants are sold out of state to the regional electric market. Lake County does not receive its’ power but they do pay for the coal pollution through their medical bills. In 2010 the Environmental Law and Policy Center conducted a study finding that the premature deaths and associated health impacts of the pollution from the Lake County coal plant in Waukegan totaled $86 million annually in health costs.

In 2010 the Clean Air Task Force released their “Toll from Coal” report calculating health effects of pollution from coal plants. The report, using 2010 data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, concluded that pollution from the Waukegan coal plant contributed annually to: 570 Asthma Attacks, 34 Premature Death, 54 Heart Attacks, 21 Incidences of Chronic Bronchitis, 35 Asthma ER visits.

Coal ash is the waste material left after coal is burned. It contains arsenic, boron, mercury and other pollutants, many of them toxic. Midwest Generation disposes of coal ash in two active coal ash ponds at the Waukegan power plant. Groundwater monitoring wells at the Waukegan plant have shown that elevated levels of these pollutants at the plant violate Illinois state law. When coal ash comes into contact with water, these hazardous materials leach out of the waste and contaminate groundwater and surface water. These substances are poisonous and can cause cancer and damage the nervous system or other organs, especially in children.

In 2012, the NAACP released its “Coal Blooded” report, which found that low-income and minority communities are disproportionately affected by health-threatening pollution from coal plants. Six million Americans living near coal plants have an average income of $18,400, compared with $21,857 nationwide, and 39 percent are people of color. Based on a national analysis, the report ranked the Waukegan power plant as the twelfth worst violator of environmental justice in the country, and gives the plant a letter grade of “F.” The report ranked Midwest Generation’s Fisk and Crawford plants in Chicago first and third, respectively. Both Fisk and Crawford coal plants have since retired.

**Peabody struggle in East St. Louis Illinois**

The State of Illinois has a long history of coal. It is also the leading producer of Nuclear Power in the United States. However, its legacy in regards to the production of energy is a devastating one. It’s the home to the World’s largest coal company, Peabody, which was founded in 1883 in Chicago, IL, ten years prior to the Columbian Exposition, which introduced
the world to what we today look at as primitive technology such as; the light bulb, the camera, and the zipper.

For the last Century, Peabody has been impacting low-income communities of color, through every stage of the coal-to-energy process. Recently, in downstate Illinois the Shawnee people have been experiencing the loss of their land, their clean air, their clean water, and overall human rights because of Peabody Coal’s illicit actions. For example, at Rocky Branch, Peabody has been operating without an Illinois Department of Natural Resources mining permit and subjecting nearby communities to the toxic fall-out from strip mining operations. Despite strong objections from local activists who have even blocked roads, the company has located mining equipment on Shawnee lands and endangered local communities. Peabody continues a long history of exploiting indigenous lands and devastating the environment.

**Petcoke struggle in South Chicago**

When the Steel Mills left the Southeast side of Chicago, so went the jobs, and of course tax revenue. An already under resourced low-income community of Color, the South Chicago neighborhood is currently experiencing the byproducts of industrialization; brownfields, superfund sites, unsafe and abandon infrastructure, and of course a lack of jobs are all too common for its residents. However, another repercussion of industrialization, Petroleum Coke, otherwise known as “Petcoke”, is the byproduct of the area’s oil refineries.

Although the BP oil-refinery is in nearby Indiana, the Tar sands oil it refines comes from Canada. The site where Petcoke is being stored is owned by Koch industries, just along the Calumet River. What seemed to be once a local issue has now gone international, and resistance is starting to build on the Southside of Chicago. Other low-income communities of color, such as Pilsen and Little Village, also on the Southside of the city, have experienced their own struggle with coal-dust. Residents of these communities now look towards one-another in solidarity to combat these environmental and racial injustices. We can no longer trust the State of Illinois nor the City of Chicago to protect us when they themselves present us with weak regulations filled with bias loopholes which favor industry owners.

**Pure Metals struggle in Pilsen**

The Southwest Chicago community of Pilsen is already overburdened with harmful emissions from local smelters, freight train lines and a Planned Manufacturing District (PMD), that houses in particular a current metal shredder operation and a garbage sorting facility. The city of Chicago’s Zoning Board of Appeals recently approved a special-use application for a new Metal Shredder for this PMD that is across the road from Benito Juárez Community Academy, the neighborhood’s biggest high school. This was despite four hours of testimony that included community members both for and against the plant.
The application came from Pure Metal Recycling, LLC, a company with ties to Acme Metal Refinery, a major contributor to a campaign fund controlled by Pilsen’s alderman, Danny Solis (25th). Acme was in the public eye last August after the Internal Revenue Service raided the company’s Bridgeport headquarters. Solis endorsed the proposed Pilsen metal shredder in a letter presented to the zoning board. Pure Metals signed a one-page “covenant” with Solis and community residents to give “first priority in hiring to Pilsen residents” and to not discriminate against them “because of immigration status or past criminal records.”

Pilsen Alliance and the Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization (PERRO) are fighting back by making Acme’s corrupt record in Bridgeport public and warning that metal shredders are known for pollution, fires and explosions and increase traffic and noise in the communities they are located in.

The estimated additional emissions of heavy metals (such as mercury and lead), PCB’s, dioxins, furans and other harmful pollutants that would result from an increase in emissions from these facilities would significantly increase the risk of cancer and chronic asthma for residents of Pilsen. This is especially troubling in light of the already high rates of cancer, asthma, high blood pressure and heart disease experienced by people of color and young people living in Pilsen and the potential for detrimental synergistic health impacts.

PERRO is presently working with other organizations in Pilsen to educate community about the potential health impacts and to advocate for the denial of future permits from the City and State regulatory agencies due to the environmental justice impacts. There is a compelling health risk associated with the air emissions limits proposed by Pure Metals. That health risk disproportionately impacts low-income people, people of color, and children residing in Pilsen.

The burden on Pilsen communities from the cumulative impacts from existing pollution sources contributes significantly to the health risks and reduced quality of life for many of the children and adults already suffering from asthma and other diseases that have been linked to PM2.5 exposure.

**Conclusion**

As these examples and many others demonstrate, Illinois remains a state with vast environmental injustices rooted in histories of industrial development and racism. Twenty years after the Executive Order 12898 that mandated “environmental protection for all communities” state officials and local municipalities in Illinois continue to reinforce environmental inequalities. Furthermore, the Illinois EPA, the institution responsible for holding industries accountable, does not prioritize environmental justice and remains a source of frustration for local activists. Consequently, local communities threatened by polluting industries face an increasingly difficult struggle to raise their concerns and achieve concrete industry and policy changes that can address their needs.