

Pilsen vs. Polluters

By Kari Lydersen

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Some vistas in Pilsen and Little Village, adjacent mostly Latino working-class neighborhoods in Chicago, look like scenes from the industrial revolution. Plumes of smoke and steam billow from smokestacks at two of the country's oldest and dirtiest coal-burning power plants. Freight trains chug along the perimeters, and trucks barrel down the main arteries. Factories making cheese, steel fixtures and other goods are nestled among quaint residential three-flats, vibrant stretches of small businesses and crumbling but stately columned buildings. Right in the heart of Pilsen, a century-old foundry making brass ingots releases clouds of greenish, foul-smelling.

There are few green spaces or even trees. Not surprisingly, rates of asthma and other respiratory problems in the community are high, especially among children. Some of the Mexican families who live here came from cities with pollution just as bad or worse. Others came from the campo and never had to deal with this type of soot or grime before.

Since its inception as a magnet for immigrants from Eastern Europe, Pilsen has always been a neighborhood known for community organizing and resistance. Now, residents are putting this energy into cleaning up the neighborhood. And they don't mean getting rid of "undesirable" homeless people or gang members as some use that phrase, they mean forcing the polluters to clean up their acts.

Until recently many Pilsen residents didn't even know what was going on in H Kramer, the brass foundry two blocks from one of the neighborhood's few parks. But they knew what came out of it – rancid smelling smoke and sometimes even particulate matter that would collect on their cars and window sills.

"Scorecard: The Pollution Information Site" lists H Kramer as being in the top 10 percent of industries nationwide in emissions of toxic and cancer-causing compounds, with the main ones being lead and nickel. Especially for the many children in the area, lead poisoning is a serious danger that can lead to mental impairment and other problems. Last fall, activists canvassed to get a non-binding referendum on the November ballot asking if residents wanted a complete, public

investigation of the content and risk factor of H Kramer's emissions. 95 percent in that precinct said yes.

Shortly after, officials from the city's Department of the Environment met with members of a new group calling itself PERRO (Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization, or in Spanish "dog," as in watchdog).

"Frequently an overpowering, foul-smelling smoke spews out of the H Kramer building, coming not only from the stacks but even from the cracks and bricks of the building itself," said Karen Sheets, of PERRO, at a recent press conference. "It has received many complaints from residents and been fined tens of thousands of dollars by the EPA over the years, but still the pollution continues."

The department agreed to work with PERRO and the EPA to do an investigation of H Kramer.

Dorian Breuer, a resident activist, noted that working with the city is part of a multi-pronged approach to pollution in the neighborhood. This approach also includes public forums and grassroots action by residents.

"It may be that the emissions aren't illegal, it may be meeting requirements under current policy," Breuer said. "So we may ask them to go beyond just meeting the requirements. This smoke is filling people's apartments when their windows are open in the summer, people are living in and breathing this smoke. Something has to be done."

(The president of H Kramer didn't return calls for this story).

Meanwhile for several years now residents have also been putting pressure on ComEd and its parent Midwest Generation to reduce emissions at the two coal-burning power plants. Since both were built long before the Clean Air Act took effect in 1977, they are exempt from meeting clean air standards. A 2001 study conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health linked the two plants statistically to an extra 41 premature deaths, 2,800 asthma attacks and 550 emergency room visits annually. Local residents worked to place a referendum on the 2003 ballot asking whether the plants should reduce their emissions by 90 percent; that measure also passed resoundingly. A citywide clean air ordinance has been proposed, but without clear support from the mayor it has languished for years without passing.

Activists note that you wouldn't be likely to see things like coal-burning power plants and brass foundries oozing smoke in white, more upscale neighborhoods.

"If something like this was happening in another neighborhood, people would pay more attention," said Juan Miguel Turnil, executive director of the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization. "But when we're talking about our neighborhood, it's not a priority for them. They say we'll look into it, and whenever we have time we'll help you. We're talking about discrimination and racism against our community."