

# Tar Sands Hell in Detroit

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A vast pile of toxic waste, 40 feet high, sits by the Detroit River, the symbol and substance of the contempt in which Black urban dwellers are held by the Lords of Capital. The Koch brothers, who own the poison petcoke pile, are far more powerful than the 700,000 people of Detroit, who have been stripped of their basic democratic rights and have no government to defend them.

If one picture is worth 1,000 words, then the pile of petroleum coke, [petcoke](#), which sits along the Detroit River tells quite a story. Beginning in November 2012, the Koch Carbon company began dumping the petcoke, which is a byproduct of tar sands oil production and also a cheap fuel. Koch Carbon is owned by those Kochs, Charles and David, the incredibly wealthy right wing industrialists who play a very public role in bringing union busting Right to Work laws, Stand Your Ground, and other horrors to state legislatures across the country.

But this is not just a story about the Kochs. It would be too simplistic to lay the blame at the feet of these obvious villains alone. The three story high pile of fossil fuel waste says quite a lot about the political and economic calamity that has ensnared Detroit and which moves more slowly but relentlessly to the rest of the country.

The petcoke originates from tar sands oil in Alberta, Canada, it is later refined by Marathon Petroleum and then purchased by the Koch company. Petcoke has been called the [dirtiest](#) of dirty fuels because it emits more carbon dioxide than coal and contains more metal and sulfur. As a byproduct it costs nothing to produce yet can be sold at a high profit. Without seeking permits, with no public notification whatever, Koch Carbon began dumping the petcoke last year and it isn't hard to figure out why Detroit was chosen as the location.

Detroit as a sovereign public entity no longer exists. It is completely powerless, having been taken over by the "[lords of capital](#)" personified in this case by emergency manager Kevyn Orr. There is quite literally no one in Detroit's government with the power to stand up to the Kochs, Orr, or to anyone else who can do the city harm.

It is a sad tale indeed. Detroit residents near the pet coke pile have the toxic dusts in [their homes](#) and invariably in their lungs too. Despite assurances to the contrary, the dust cannot be contained and [video footage](#) showing a dark cloud blowing to Windsor, Ontario gave the story new urgency to the public but less so to elected officials.

Michigan Senators Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow could only muster enough energy to ask for an EPA study of the health effects of petcoke. The Department of Environmental Quality doesn't even pretend to protect the health of residents and has consistently downplayed the possibility of any health threat. What better place to dump a pile of poison than a city on the ropes which can no longer defend itself?

While the petcoke had been building for months the first action against it came not from the politicians but from ordinary citizens. On June 24<sup>th</sup> the Detroit Coalition Against Tar Sands demonstrated and blocked access to the petcoke site. The protest and months of [media coverage](#) forced the figurehead government officials to pretend they had some control and concern about the situation. Mayor Dave Bing said, *“I want to make it clear that Detroit is not a dumping ground and residents of Southwest Detroit deserve to be protected from industrial by-products.”*

Those are nice words but Bing can't do anything to stop this assault and Marathon Petroleum and Koch Carbon know it. The initial panic created by bad publicity and public questions at first caused the malefactors to say they were in the process of shipping out the stockpile and that it would disappear by the end of August. Later they appeared at a public hearing and expressed an intention to request the proper [permits](#) to keep the petcoke on site. Now the story has changed yet again. The petcoke will go to another unlucky location [in Ohio](#) but may turn up again in Michigan after all.

Detroit's present represents the future for the rest of the country. If the lords want fracking, they will get it. If they want a keystone pipeline to carry tar sands oil across the United States they will get it. If they want to take over one of the nation's biggest cities and decimate its public services they can do that too.

The lords of capital have brought hell on earth to Detroit in more ways than one but that city isn't alone. State and local governments across the country are using it as a case study in how to decimate the power of unions and public employees. It doesn't take powers of clairvoyance to predict that president Obama will approve the Keystone XL pipeline which will bring tar sands oil and the need for new places to dump petcoke. Hell on earth is coming to a city near you.

**Margaret Kimberley's Freedom Rider column appears weekly in BAR, and is widely reprinted elsewhere. She maintains a frequently updated blog as well as at <http://freedomrider.blogspot.com>.**

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