

A Hunger Strike on Chicago's Southeast Side

Via [Jacobin](#)

In 2019, the City of Chicago gifted the real estate development firm [Sterling Bay](#) \$1.3 billion to build infrastructure for future residents in a postindustrial region about two miles north of its business hub downtown. The giveaway was standard fare for the city, offering up huge amounts of money to an already wealthy and powerful developer. And it stands in sharp contrast to the city's development plans for the Southeast Side, where neighborhood activists are now trying to prevent some toxic obstacles in Sterling Bay's North Side redevelopment area from being relocated to their backyard.

A group of hunger strikers from southeast Chicago are fighting the scrap metal company General Iron, as the company looks to relocate its toxic operations out of the North Side area where Sterling Bay is developing and into a South Side neighborhood that includes public schools. Why, the hunger strikers ask, is a company too dangerous for a wealthy white North Side neighborhood okay in a working-class Latino neighborhood?

The Southeast Side, in this case the neighborhoods of Hegewisch and South Deering, has long been subjected to serious pollution. Oscar Sanchez, a twenty-three-year-old hunger striker and the cofounder of Southeast Youth Alliance (SYA), is a lifelong resident of the area who recently went thirty days without solid food in protest of General Iron's plan. Sanchez, along with about a dozen other monthlong hunger strikers, wants the City of Chicago to deny General Iron permission to move into the area.

The strikers recently got some good news, which may be related

to the publicity that their activism has brought to the story: on March 16, the Chicago Department of Public Health [asked](#) the company for additional information before moving forward with a permit, citing concerns about environmental impact. But the fight isn't over.

Sanchez explained to me how, growing up on the Southeast Side, he and his peers often dealt with the various miseries of their neighborhood's environment with a kind of nihilistic humor. Whether they were reacting to mysterious heavy metals found on baseball fields (from long-departed factories during the neighborhood's industrial heyday, they assumed), or the structural decay of George Washington High School, located just half a mile from the proposed new General Iron location, the refrain they'd rhetorically ask each other was the same: "What do you expect?" That the area was a dumping ground for toxic materials came to feel like an unchangeable feature of life in their neighborhood.

But the nihilist humor has recently slipped as groups like Sanchez's SYA and the Southeast Environmental Task Force, headed by Peggy Salazar, have seized the moment created by the hunger strike, as national and even international media have picked up the story.

For decades, General Iron has been located in Lincoln Park, a former working-class neighborhood now mostly populated by wealthy professionals and DePaul University students. The scrapping company is the neighborhood's last reminder of its own past industrial businesses, and an increasingly unwelcome one as the surrounding area has morphed into a series of upper-middle-class strip malls – and the negative impacts of living near such businesses have become clearer.

Ignoring these perils became impossible when, in spring 2020, an explosion at the site caused a thick dark fog to roil over the surrounding streets. General Iron saw its goodwill with area residents evaporate. The scrapper – now owned and run by

Reserve Management Group, after many lucrative years for the [Labkon family](#) – had long been effective at holding back neighborhood opposition. This is largely because of their strategic generosity: over a period of seven years alone, they donated [hundreds of thousands of dollars](#) to various aldermen and other city and state politicians, including nominal progressives like 32nd Ward alderman Scott Waguespack, a close ally of Chicago's current mayor, Lori Lightfoot. They also brought in the help of consultants who worked for former mayors Rahm Emanuel and Richard M. Daley.

The Labkons could afford it: the *Chicago Tribune* [reported](#) last year that just two members of the family took home about \$64 million each in General Iron profits over the course of a decade. It's hard to lobby or PR your way out of an actual explosion, though.

Reserve Management Group paid an \$18,000 fine for the incident and ramped up its timetable to leave the neighborhood after health inspectors described the scrapper's effect on the area, with unusual poetry, by referring to "[the pungent odor of sweet metal that burns my nostrils](#)" – something nearby residents had long complained of. The Labkon family is looking to sell their land to the highest bidder as Sterling Bay works on the adjacent new astroturfed neighborhood, Lincoln Yards.

Hegewisch and South Deering, where the company is trying to move with a rebranding as "Southside Recycling," are primarily Latino. And so despite the nice-sounding new facility name, the environmentally discriminatory patterns of Chicago's modern industrial era have been hard to miss in this instance, and are an increasingly obvious phenomenon for Sanchez and other neighborhood activists to rally around.

The hunger strike worked much better for Hegewisch residents than attempts to have their concerns and rights heard through traditional channels. They went to city-sanctioned hearings and have spoken many times to their alderwoman, Susan

Sadlowski Garza, who comes from a family with a [legendary history](#) of union activism. But the strikers say they've always felt more patronized than actually heard.

During a Friday session this past month, Alderman [Byron Sigcho-Lopez](#) attempted to have the city council vote on a resolution of support for the strikers. Sigcho-Lopez is a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, representing the 25th Ward, and an ally of the strikers, one of over a hundred to hunger strike for a day in solidarity. The act of merely hearing out and deciding upon Sigcho-Lopez's suggestion was [voted down](#) by the council 32-15, with Garza voting no.

But the fact that the vote even occurred is a sign of the movement's success. And because of the strike's strong messaging, federal-level action is increasing. The battle previously caught the attention of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, which began an investigation on environmental discrimination in local industry permits in the dying days of Donald Trump's presidency. Now the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), too, is involved – in part because Lightfoot, owing to the new scrutiny she is facing over the plant, has deferred to the agency for consultation on the matter. How the EPA handles the issue is an early litmus test for what we can expect from the agency under President Biden.

Lightfoot herself, whose house was [visited by protestors](#) this month, is not the architect of General Iron's environmental impact and proposed move. A recent report revealed a broad culture of previous [cover-ups](#) of General Iron's impact on the Lincoln Park area prior to her stint as mayor, with those responsible ranging from former mayor Rahm Emanuel to the city's health commissioner, who tried to prevent a University of Illinois Chicago report on the company's impact – which found the General Iron site responsible for dense particulate matter pollution in the area – from finding a larger audience.

But this issue, like [others](#) Lightfoot has seen in her two

years as mayor, can show voters how interested she is in addressing inequality in the city instead of upholding it. As Sanchez explains to me, the air quality in his area has always been a source of worry. Using a \$250 air-quality detection device called an AirBeam (which he and his peers call a "Pacman," because of how it resembles a villainous ghost from the famous arcade game), resourceful Hegewisch residents can see that the average air inside the walls of their schools scores badly on the tech's color-coded rubric, going from green to yellow (from "good" to "worrisome") when it's turned on.

With the hunger strike behind them for now, much work is still ahead for SYA and the people of Hegewisch and South Deering. Reserve Management Group and the Labkon family before it have shown a willingness to spend big money for the rubber stamps they need to do business, and obscure the impact it has on the air the people living near it breathe. That probably isn't about to change, and attention to the story needs to stay high if there's any chance at stopping their typical tactics from working again. What happens next will tell us a lot about the potential of working-class organizing in Chicago to change the way things are done.