

'Evil economics': William Barber condemns proposed plastics facility in Cancer Alley

Activist joined demonstrators in St James parish as they rallied against facility that would double the amount of toxic emissions

Oliver Laughland in *Welcome, Louisiana* *The Guardian* Thu 24 Oct 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/oct/24/louisiana-cancer-alley-plastics-facility-william-barber>

For the [second time](#) in two months the moral revival campaigner and civil rights leader the Rev William Barber has visited an area of toxic [pollution](#) in Louisiana known colloquially as “Cancer Alley” as he places the fight for clean air there at the centre of a national protest movement.

The North Carolina-based activist, [thrust on to the national](#) stage after the success of the Moral Mondays protests in his home state, joined a group of local demonstrators in St James parish, between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, on Wednesday as they rallied against a proposed plastics manufacturing facility nearby.

The sprawling, \$9.4bn site in the parish’s fifth ward, pushed by the Taiwanese petrochemicals giant Formosa, would consist of 14 separate plants across 2,300 acres of land and, if approved, would be allowed to roughly double the amount of toxic emissions in the parish from 1.6m lb to 3.2m.

The proposed construction, known as the Sunshine Project, has won the support of local and state officials, [including Louisiana’s Democratic governor, John Bel Edwards](#), with the promise of 1,200 permanent jobs as well as thousands of temporary construction jobs. It would be built in the parish’s fifth district, [which is 85% African American](#).

On Wednesday evening Barber argued the project was backed by “evil economics”.

“It comes down to greed,” Barber said. “You could take an area like Cancer Alley and focus on things that would fix the environment and put people to work cleaning up the mess. But it’s almost as if people decide ‘we just want money’. And then they decide who can we make the money off of that will give us the least resistance. It’s evil economics.”

Formosa did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Barber last visited the region in July as part of a series of Guardian co-sponsored town hall events in New Orleans and Reserve, which is the focus of a year-long series, [Cancer Town](#). Reserve, in neighbouring St John the Baptist parish, has the highest risk of cancer due to airborne toxicity anywhere in the US, according to the [Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\)](#).

The primary cause of this elevated risk is emissions from a synthetic rubber plant, the Pontchartrain Works facility, operated by the Japanese chemicals giant Denka. The plant is the only place in America to emit the compound chloroprene, listed by the EPA as a “likely carcinogen”.

Earlier in the month Democratic presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren [released a detailed environmental justice platform which referenced pollution in Reserve and Cancer Alley](#).

On Wednesday, Barber said he had been in contact with a number of the leading Democratic candidates, including [Warren](#) and the Vermont senator [Bernie Sanders](#), renewing his call for them to visit polluted sites in southern [Louisiana](#).

Barber briefly broke off from an interview with the Guardian to call Warren’s personal cellphone, leaving a voicemail: “We really need to bring the campaign through Cancer Alley. We need to bring worldwide and national attention to what’s going on here. And how it is the direct relationship between policy and justice, racism and economic greed,” he said.

The march on Wednesday was [part of a two-week campaign](#) throughout the region, which began last Tuesday.

Numbers have ebbed and flowed over the days of activism as organizers hope for a large turnout at the governor’s mansion in Baton Rouge next Wednesday. Barber will return to the city for that march.

“If you go into these parishes where [the petrochemical industry] already exists, people understand there is a problem, so I think we have public opinion on our side,” said Anne Rolfes, executive director of the [Louisiana](#) Bucket Brigade, a not-for-profit environmental justice group involved in the protests.

“The gap that we have is people believing they can do something about it and I think that part of this is building excitement, building camaraderie, and then really looking at our strategies and our tactical plans for succeeding,” she said.

Barber said his continued visits to the region were having a profound effect on his campaigning.

“When I hear the deep faith of the people here. When I see people like [Robert Taylor](#) [a leading campaigner in Reserve], who could be my grandfather, and he’s standing up with power in his voice and commitment in his body, his heart, you know, that is inspiring. I’m humbled that they would even call and say: ‘Would you do something with us?’”