

Wallace, La. - Wilfred Greene, 69, a frail former school principal, and Samuel Jackson, an unemployed man half his age, are the human wall that stands between their historic Mississippi River town and Formosa Plastics Corp., a chemical giant, that wants to construct the world's largest rayon and pulp processing plant on the last stretch of green space along Louisiana's Chemical Corridor. But the fight is larger than the overwhelmingly black town of 400 or the billion-dollar chemical company that has left a trail of pollution from Taiwan to Texas. This is the story of Louisiana's longstanding practice of welcoming any chemical company that promises jobs, regardless of the effects on the environment or the people whose communities are sacrificed.

But the fight is larger than the overwhelmingly black town of 400 -many descendants of slaves who worked the adjacent Whitney Plantation -or the billion-dollar chemical company that has left a trail of pollution from Taiwan to Texas. This is the story of Louisiana's longstanding practice of welcoming any chemical company that promises jobs, regardless of the effects on the environment or the people whose communities are sacrificed.

The struggle spotlights a controversial law that gives wealthy chemical and industrial companies 10-year tax breaks, an estimated loss of \$400 million annually that would otherwise build roads and hospitals and pay for teachers in a state whose people are among the poorest in America.

"God knows we need jobs," said Samuel Jackson, 35, who along with Wilfred Greene has refused to sell his land to the Taiwanese-owned Formosa Plastics Corp. "And they're waving jobs to desperate people who are thinking about feeding their families. No guarantees, just promises. One day somebody's gotta stop and ask, 'Jobs at what cost to us? What cost to our health and safety and quality of life?' Nobody's ever asked us because we're black and poor."

The two men have been joined in their fight by historic preservationists, environmentalists and some white property owners who live nearby, perhaps the first time in Louisiana that mainstream groups have allied themselves with a black community to oppose a major chemical plant.

#### Opposition stuns officials

The level of opposition to Formosa has stunned state and local officials, who have wooed it with \$450 million in tax breaks and other incentives, including assurances of little community resistance.

To accommodate Formosa, which has spent \$10 million for 1,800 acres that includes the Whitney Plantation and most of Wallace, local zoning officials changed the land use from agricultural and residential to industrial.

Many residents denounced the zoning change, including one elderly man who was physically ejected from a meeting when he repeatedly asked board members whether Formosa had promised them jobs or business.

The school board in St. John the Baptist Parish, where Wallace is located, voted to give Formosa half its 2-cent sales tax revenue during the construction phase - about \$3 million. The school district is \$1.8 million in debt and represents one of the poorest areas in the state.

Last month the board rescinded the tax pledge, but reinstated it a week later after criticism from state and local politicians and threats by Alden Andre, U.S. vice president for Formosa, that the plant might go elsewhere.

School Board President Ann Tatje, who voted against the tax pledge, said she changed her mind after a call from Kevin Reilly, the new commerce secretary. "Mr. Reilly explained how hard it is to bring industries to Louisiana and how important the tax incentives are," she said. "He said it was an issue of credibility."

School board member Emily Loper is disgusted that Formosa would even consider accepting education money. "If they are really interested in this community - an educated future work force if for no other reason -then they should be giving money instead of taking," she said.

#### EPA considering permits

Formosa is applying for federal and state environmental permits to operate a rayon and pulp processing plant that would dump 53 million gallons of wastewater daily into the Mississippi River. To make rayon,

Formosa will need 8,800 tons of hardwood daily. The wastewater from the process would include chloroform, which has been linked to cancer, and dioxin, a highly toxic contaminant.

Initially, the Environmental Protection Agency said it would not take into account the company's environmental history when considering the Wallace site, despite leveling its highest-ever fine against Formosa in 1990 for contaminating soil and ground water at its Texas plant.

Mr. Andre said the Texas plant "has had some problems, but it is an isolated case that we're clearing up. We have a great reputation and record here, and we're going to bring those people lots of jobs."

"We didn't push our way in here," he said. "We were invited by the former governor and parish president. Governor Edwin Edwards is very excited and he has personally checked into it and he thinks it's an incredible project. I just don't understand why the people down in St. John don't trust us."

Formosa has several plants in Louisiana, including one in Baton Rouge that has been fined repeatedly for polluting the air.

`Last remaining green stretch'

Zeb Mayhew, who owns Oak Alley Plantation, a nearby 160-year-old former sugar plantation visited by 100,000 tourists annually, blames politicians for despoiling the state's natural and historic resources.

"Why don't our government officials, those guys charged with economic development, face the facts that dirty industry has not brought prosperity to the area?" he said. "Why are these communities so poor if we already have all these savior plants all along the Mississippi River? Why don't those charged with protecting us and our environment ask themselves if we, the people, and our irreplaceable natural resources can stand a Formosa?"

Mr. Mayhew has reason to be concerned, said Paul Templet, former secretary of the state's Department of Environmental Quality.

"I have real concerns about putting that plant in that location," he said. "There will be explosions, light, traffic and noise pollution. Smokestacks, a constant smell, like rotten eggs. That's the last remaining green stretch on the river. Maybe they should consider leaving it alone."

But he doubts that will happen. "This state has never turned down an industrial or petrochemical plant that wanted to come in," he said. "Never."

Mr. Andre has said the Wallace plant will employ 800 workers during the three years of construction and 1,000 permanently, but those figures have changed several times over the past three years. And he acknowledges that the plant will need highly skilled workers.

`Almost a reverse Robin Hood'

Mr. Greene and Mr. Jackson have grown weary of hearing different answers about jobs and the environmental impact of the plant. They've started holding monthly public meetings for St. John residents concerned over the future of their communities.

Recently Roosevelt Dean, a 20-year veteran of a Mobile rayon plant, was telling the audience about health and working conditions when he was interrupted by an unemployed man in his 20s.

"Man," he shouted. "We need jobs. We don't care what can happen to us 10 years down the line. We need to eat today."

"You aren't going to be hired at that plant," Mr. Dean answered quietly. "They're going to need highly skilled people, people who have worked in rayon plants or know the technology involved. You need to know the truth. If you get hired at all, it's going to be the lowest-paying menial work - sweeping up, stuff like that."

The tax breaks Louisiana politicians eagerly offer are not among the top reasons companies give for locating in the state, according to a study done by Oliver Houck, a Tulane Law School professor. The chief executive officers he interviewed rated cheap labor and access to the Mississippi River above tax breaks.

"It's almost a reverse Robin Hood," said Dr. Templet. "We take from these poor parishes in a poor state to give to industries that are tax-exempt to add to their bottom lines and their shareholders out of state and out of the country."

Green belt had been bypassed

Despite campaign promises to continue former Gov. Buddy Roemer's gains in protecting Louisiana's natural resources, Mr. Edwards may do away with the environmental scorecard program, which ties industry performance to tax breaks.

"We're giving industries a write-off to pollute the environment," Dr. Houck said. "The write-off dwarfs any penalty. It's like, 'We'll fine you \$1,000 for robbing a bank, but we'll give you \$1 million for getting away with it.'"

Until Formosa was encouraged to consider Wallace for its plant, the chemical industry had bypassed the 30-mile green belt along the rural west bank of St. John the Baptist Parish.

The Great Mississippi River Road meanders along some of the most fertile farmland in the state in what is known as Plantation Country, dotted with antebellum plantation houses, 150-year-old oak trees and historic cemeteries.

The rural landscape sharply contrasts to the more than 125 oil and chemical plants whose twisted pipes and belching smokestacks line the remainder of both banks of the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to New Orleans.

Chemical Corridor for U.S.

Officially called the Chemical Corridor, it is known as "Cancer Alley" to public health researchers and those who live near the plants. The plants produce a quarter of all the chemicals used in America for such products as gasoline, fertilizer, herbicides, paper, plastic and paint. Louisiana ranks second in the country in the amount of toxic chemicals released into the environment and has the highest lung cancer rate among white men.

Last May, Formosa turned in a first draft of an EPA-required environmental impact study. EPA's Dallas chief wrote that the "impact analysis is extremely weak . . . and a large number of very important subjects are given little or no discussion and/or evaluation." Those included air pollution controls and odors, wastewater treatment, public health impact and what Formosa is going to do with rest of its property.

Formosa plans to use only 300 acres in Wallace for the rayon and pulp processing facilities. Although Mr. Andre has repeatedly denied that the rest will be used for a polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plant, environmentalists are alarmed because of Formosa's pollution record in Baton Rouge and Texas.

"I'm not saying never," Mr. Andre said, "but we have no such plans now."

Promises don't assure Greene

The manufacture of PVC, for plastic bags, toys and pipes, requires highly toxic materials such as ethylene dichloride, a carcinogen, and vinyl chloride, which can cause liver and brain cancer and is odorless until it reaches high levels.

Formosa wants to expand the Texas PVC plant tenfold and has begun construction although it lacks operating permits.

"We are very aware of the significance of both the projects and the controversy surrounding them," said Joe Swick of EPA's regional office in Dallas, adding that Formosa's record in Texas will be taken into account when deciding whether it should get permits for Wallace. "I can assure you that the environment impact statements will be two of the most thorough and studied reports from any EPA region in the country."

Mr. Greene and Mr. Jackson say they take little solace from officials who promise to protect their community.

"I remember many an evening when my father would come home from work and my mother would tell him his dinner was ready," said Mr. Greene, 69. "He'd just look at her, and hardly above a whisper, he'd say, 'too tired to eat.' Fighting this company is not how I pictured spending my last years, but I'm not too tired to do it. If we lose this fight, we lose our town and our heritage. We lose everything."