

# Explosion at Michigan fireworks factory kills at least four workers

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At least four people were killed Monday in an explosion and fire that tore through a fireworks factory near Osseo, Michigan where seven other workers perished in a similar blast three months ago.

The explosion occurred around 8:30 a.m. at the Independence Professional Fireworks Company. The plant is located in a farming area about 90 miles southwest of Detroit and 15 miles north of the Michigan-Ohio border.

The blast left only one wall standing in a building where fireworks are assembled, roughly 100 yards from a structure that was completely destroyed December 11, Hillsdale County Sheriff Stan Burchardt said.

The previous explosion killed six women and one man while injuring 13 others at the plant. Twenty-two people were working at the time of the explosion. Federal, state and local investigators determined that blast occurred in a shell assembly room, leaving only a concrete slab with debris and human remains scattered over a wide area. Investigators said they might never fully understand what caused the explosion.

Independence is one of the largest producers of fireworks in the US, producing an estimated 1.3 million fireworks shells a year. Independence makes all of its products by hand, using materials like nitrates, sulfurs, charcoal and black powder. The December 1998 explosion was the second major blast in the last 10 years at the 26-year-old company.

Fireworks producers often use low-paid workers who accept the risk because they lack other opportunities. Last October 13 at least 10 workers were killed in an explosion and fire in Tultepec, near Mexico City. In January, 17 workers, including three children, were killed in fireworks factory in China.

According to Maura Campbell, spokesperson for the Department of Consumer and Industry Services which

licenses fireworks manufacturers, the state did not revoke or suspend the company's license after last December's explosion. She said the factory was free to resume its operations, pending the outcome of an investigation. The investigation "was all but ready to be made public, and now this," Ms. Campbell said.

The Michigan explosion comes on the heels of a rash of fatal explosions and fires throughout the US, which has among the highest rate of occupational fatalities--an average of 17 per day--of any industrialized nation. Occupational safety and health inspections have been drastically reduced in states like Michigan whose politicians have sought to improve the "business climate."

On February 1 an explosion at the Ford Motor Company's Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan led to the death of six powerhouse workers. This was followed by the death of five workers in an explosion at a small chemical plant, Concept Sciences, near Allentown, Pennsylvania on February 19, and the February 23 explosion and fire at the Tosco oil refinery near Martinez, California which killed four workers.



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