

One dead, two missing in Virginia auto parts plant explosion

Kate Randall
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A powerful explosion ripped through the New River Castings auto parts plant in Radford, Virginia at 9:30 p.m. Sunday night, leaving one person dead and two missing. Six workers remain hospitalized. The one man killed in the blast was identified as Curtis Groom, 29.

The cause of the explosion is under investigation, but one worker told the *Roanoke Times* that employees had been informed of a natural gas buildup in the basement of the plant. Representatives of the natural gas supplier Cities Gas Co. were at the scene of the accident.

Radford Fire Chief Lee Simpkins said the blaze started in the plant's core department. "There's a lot of twisted metal everywhere you look, Simpkins said. "It is mass destruction in an area the size of a ballfield in the center of that plant." He estimated the damage at more than \$30 million.

Following the explosion, 20-foot flames shot up from the factory, and a wall at the plant's main building was reportedly destroyed. Plant worker Scott Hetherington said, "All of a sudden I saw a big orange ball of fire, and everything was pitch black". Sherri Birkelbach, who lives about three blocks away, commented that the explosion "sounded like something was coming through the roof of my house."

The New River Castings plant, and the related Lynchburg Foundry, are owned by the Troy, Michigan-based Intermet Corporation, and employ together about 1,000 people in Radford, a town about 30 miles west of Roanoke. The plant makes transmissions and other parts for the auto industry. The two plants have come under scrutiny in recent months from state environmental officials for releasing black dust into nearby neighborhoods.

About 100 workers were in the plant at the time of the blast, and a number of workers were treated for smoke inhalation and minor cuts and bruises at an

ambulance station set up outside the plant. All of the workers emerging from the plant were covered with black soot.

On Monday anxious relatives waited outside the plant as rescuers searched for two missing workers. Karen Anderson Hamilton, 35, was one of the missing workers. Her husband, Douglas Hamilton, was also working in the plant at the time of the explosion but escaped unharmed. The couple have been married for only six months. The other missing worker is Debbie Sheppard, 37.



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