

Netherlands fireworks factory explosion—the downside of the Dutch social model

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31 May 2000

On May 13 about 100 tonnes of fireworks and other explosives detonated after a fire in the factory of S.E. Fireworks, situated in the middle of the working class housing estate of Mekkelholt in the northern Dutch city of Enschede. The blast was felt up to 30 kilometres away.

In a split second almost 400 houses were reduced to their foundations and another 1,000 damaged. Eighteen people were killed. A further 946 were injured, 23 of whom are still being treated in nearby hospitals—four in intensive care. Three people are still missing and the number of victims could well increase. Twelve days after the catastrophe the search for victims under the ruins at the centre of the blast was abandoned.

Investigations into the cause of the explosion have brought to light a multitude of facts testifying to the negligence of the factory owners and the authorities.

That the facility stood in the middle of a housing estate for over 20 years has caused a sensation. The initial assumption—that the factory had been there first and the housing settlement only later built around it—was soon refuted. The estate, built in the 1920s, is inhabited mainly by foreigners, students and the unemployed. Approximately 2,500 people from 10 nations—including Turkey, Ghana, Morocco and the former Dutch colony of Surinam—reside there. The attempt being made to shift responsibility for the suffering onto the victims themselves can only be met with indignation. In light of the tragedy, it makes little difference whether the construction of the fireworks factory in a residential area was officially approved or, on the other hand, the housing estate was allowed to develop around such a plant already existing there.

It is a scandal that apparently no one—from among the local authorities or the surrounding residents—knew of the existence of a potential disaster. Even the fire brigade was unaware of what they were getting involved in when they set off after a routine alarm to put out a fire at what they believed was a paper warehouse.

It is not excluded that the catastrophe came to assume such horrifying dimensions precisely because of this lack of knowledge on the part of the fire fighters. Inquisitive passers-by were not warned away, nor were measures undertaken to evacuate nearby houses. Even more seriously, it is possible that an attempt was made to extinguish burning magnesium and other chemicals with water. As a result the catalyst for the climactic explosion could have been produced. Magnesium, which burns reaching a temperature of over 1000 degrees Celsius, splits water into its

chemical components of hydrogen and oxygen. Oxyhydrogen and a subsequent detonation is the result. Pouring oil onto the fire could not have had worse consequences. As a result, four firemen paid for their bravery with their lives.

But even if these mistakes in handling the explosion were to be eventually confirmed, this would only explain what triggered the catastrophe. Its real causes flow from the fact that the firm responsible was able to stockpile, apparently unhindered, large quantities of dangerous materials stacked closely together. Furthermore it seems the firm was allowed to carry on its business regardless of the most basic safety standards.

In 1977 S.E. Fireworks was authorised to store up to 16 tonnes of fireworks, classes I and II. Twenty years later the firm received permission to accumulate and deposit together large fireworks. This entailed an extension of its warehouse capacity through official authorisation in 1997 and 1999. On the fateful day of the explosion, 158 tonnes of material of pyrotechnic class IV were stored on the premises.

However, safety measures were not implemented to keep up with this scale of development. The material was not kept in underground bunkers, as is the norm in such cases and officially prescribed. Instead it was stored in ship containers, arranged closely together at ground level, and not separated either by customary earth walls or any other form of partitioning.

On top of all this, as can be determined from aerial photographs of the factory area shortly before the disaster as well as from the statement of a fireman, the doors of the containers were often left standing open. That such an occurrence was the rule rather than the exception can be observed from various newspaper reports. In these reports Martin Volk, the leading pyrotechnic expert of the Berlin County Office for Criminal Investigation, had the opportunity to give his impressions of S.E. Fireworks from a visit last November. Volk noticed at the time the open container doors and the direct proximity of the housing community—something highly unusual for this kind of industry. The premises also lacked lightning conductors, emergency escape routes and any kind of safety construction. The stockpiled goods were even falsely labelled, warning of less danger than was actually the case. Volk commented: “The whole depot was full of striking irregularities ... right in the middle of a residential area.”

Nevertheless, Volk shared the view of other experts that even this degree of negligence was not enough to explain an explosion of the magnitude that occurred in Enschede. The public

prosecutor's office has in the meantime voiced the suspicion that the owners of S.E. Fireworks were storing and processing great quantities of illegal materials on the site. An international arrest warrant was issued for Ruud Bakker and his partner Willem Pater, who gave themselves up to police a week after the explosion.

It would be a mistake, however, to limit responsibility for the catastrophe to a couple of criminal types who committed excesses in their playing with fire. While it is apparent that Bakker and Pater had not the least respect for the law, their behaviour was encouraged by the local authorities and politicians in general.

Year after year, the two men now under arrest were able to secure renewed official permission to store explosives in large quantities and in containers. This permission was granted them by an authority of no less than the Dutch Ministry of Defence. A few days before the disaster, an official commission had inspected the factory premises and deemed them safe. Only last December this same commission had dismissed from office its head inspector, Major W. Ceelen, on suspicion of accepting bribes. In return for cash payment, Ceelen had issued fireworks with licences to operate and evidence of his involvement with S.E. Fireworks was found among his documents. Under these circumstances a more thorough investigation would have been more than appropriate.

Moreover, the regulations concerning the operation of such dangerous plants and warehouses were scarcely adequate for a country that is supposed to adhere to the highest European standards. In fact the use of containers for such storage was officially authorised. This is despite the fact that in another case in 1997 such containers had been judged by the state technical investigations institute, TNO, as totally unsuitable for the safe storage of explosives such as those used in the production of large fireworks. They are able to withstand fire for only four minutes and not, as officially required, for at least an hour. Local Deputy Mayor Eric Helder commented: "We had to authorise the containers, there was simply no alternative within the existing legal framework."

It should be remembered, however, that the legal conditions now in existence did not appear out of the blue. They are the consequence of self-imposed restrictions on the powers of politicians vis-à-vis big business. Since 1982 these restrictions have been increasingly making their mark in society in the wake of the so-called Dutch "Polder Model". Euphemistically referred to in Germany as "practical constraints", they serve to justify letting companies do what they want.

The Dutch government's recent appointment of an "independent" commission to look into the causes of the catastrophe should not be seen as evidence that it intends to clarify why the disaster happened, but rather as an indication that it has something to hide. This commission will be used to win time, just like the one appointed in 1992 when an Israeli transport plane crashed in the Amsterdam suburb of Bijlmermeer and 43 people were killed. In deference to the on-going investigation (which is due to conclude its deliberations at the end of the year) every embarrassing question will be fobbed off. In the meantime, the parliamentary committee of enquiry in relation to the former commission (dealing with the Israeli plane crash) has been able to bring evidence of serious transgressions. However, there have

been no consequences for those responsible and public interest has long since shifted to other concerns.

The public prosecutor's office has also called for a news blackout with respect to the two owners of S.E. Fireworks under arrest, because "they need some peace and quiet".

Although the exact circumstances of the explosion will remain obscure for some time, one aspect is becoming more and more obvious. The progressive freeing of capital from economic and social restraints is being accompanied by an increasing lack of responsibility on the part of firms and authorities in relation to the needs and even the lives of the general population. Deregulation and total submission to market requirements—as practised since 1982 in the guise of the "Polder Model", the Dutch variant of the German "contract for labour"—are not bringing universal prosperity, or even a reduction in unemployment. Rather they are resulting in low-paid jobs, uncontrollable catastrophes and enormous suffering.

Finally, let us consider a claim repeatedly made at times of international catastrophes. It is asserted that such occurrences would be impossible in a country like Germany because of the stricter laws in place there. This is the sort of thing that is spread around by Klaus Gotzen, business manager of the German Alliance of the Pyrotechnic Industry.

Firstly, the existence of a law in Germany does not exclude the possibility that such a law will be broken. Railway safety regulations were not able to prevent the Inter-City Express disaster at Eschede in 1998. But an even greater danger stems from the fact that the German government has emulated the "Dutch model" for years, and the state's withdrawal from assuming responsibility for the setting of guidelines has become the goal of all politicians. Deregulation is the most urgent demand of the business world. Deregulation is the measure of how "modern" a politician is regarded.

Since the catastrophe at Enschede only a few weeks ago, three illegal fireworks depots have been vacated in Holland alone, and one of these was no more than 20 kilometres away from Enschede. In Berlin it has been discovered that in the municipal district of Neukölln—a poorer residential area comparable to the Mekkelholt housing estate—there exists a fireworks depot bunker which neither the residents nor the fire brigade had known anything about.



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