

Chemical explosion in Toulouse, France leaves at least 29 dead

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On Friday, September 21 at 10:18 a.m. the French town of Toulouse was rocked by a devastating chemical explosion. Two production halls of the AZF fertiliser factory, a subsidiary of AtoFina and part of the oil giant TotalFinaElf, literally flew into the air. Initial reports spoke of 29 dead and 34 with severe injuries. A total of 2,400 were injured, most of them with cuts arising from splintered, flying glass. On Sunday evening five chemical workers remained unaccounted for. One of the dead was a 15-year-old boy.

Four hundred sixty workers are employed in the factory, working in several shifts. The workers present were caught off-guard by the huge explosion and had no chance to escape. Two chimneys collapsed and all that remained from the two halls at the centre of the explosion was a crater 10 metres deep and 50 metres wide. The pressure from the explosion was sufficient to send automobiles flying into the air, causing a nearby shopping centre to collapse and severely damaging all buildings in the surrounding area.

Windows were shattered over a radius of 5 kilometres and many students at a secondary school in the neighbourhood suffered injuries. The city motorway towards the south was transformed into a field of rubble by a rain of dust and bricks, which damaged numerous cars and injured their drivers.

The detonation resulted in a panic in the city centre some 3 kilometres from the blast. The telephone network collapsed as a huge orange coloured cloud of gas, smelling of ammonia, moved towards the city centre. Gas masks were distributed in the town centre and the metro system in Toulouse was evacuated because of the spread of gas. The city council issued a warning that people should stay indoors and close their windows—a problem for those whose windows had already been shattered.

The airport at Toulouse-Blagnac and the main railway station were closed and 90 schools in the area evacuated. Over radio, inhabitants were called upon to refrain from drinking tap water and use as little water as possible. As many citizens attempted to leave in their cars, they suddenly encountered police blockades at the main roads to the south and at the central city ring road.

Damage caused by the explosion and the subsequent pressure wave is expected to run into several billion francs. The detonation could be felt 80 kilometres away and the Institute for Geophysics at Strasbourg, which measures all seismic changes, registered the blast at 3.4 on the Richter scale. This makes the explosion at Toulouse one of the biggest in modern industrial history, ranking together with such accidents as the 1921 explosion at the Oppau nitrogen works in Germany, with over 500 dead, and the chemical leak at Union Carbide in Bhopal, India in 1984, in which thousands died.

Coming just 10 days after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and amidst an anti-terrorism hysteria encouraged by politicians and the press, it is no wonder that the initial reaction by the local population was fear of another terror attack. French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, who rushed to the scene of the disaster, stated that he did not exclude the possibility that the cause of the explosion “was perhaps not traceable to an accident”.

The situation at the Toulouse factory, however, is a classic example of how such terrible catastrophes are possible under present-day capitalism, irrespective of terror attacks. In fact there could well have been hundreds of dead last Friday had the explosion reached other dangerous chemical factories situated nearby, e.g., an explosives factory owned by the SNPE (National Society for Powder and Explosives), which

produces the highly flammable fuel for Ariane rockets. Toulouse is the home of France's air and space industry.

For years the AZF petrochemical factory has been regarded as a ticking time bomb. Dangerous conditions in the factory were well known and a source of concern and debate at every local election. The factory had been assessed in the category "Seveso-II", i.e., in a list of 1,250 workers and nodal points in France, it was cited along with 400 other plants as posing a considerable threat to the environment in the event of an accident.

State-run television reported that security inspectors had reported problems at the plant in the course of an inspection carried out last year. Their report emphasised the danger of an explosion. According to the news agency *NZZ-Online*, experts for factory safety had already received alarming information last week of leaks in the plant, through which liquid ammonia gas could escape.

The French chemical workers trade union FCE-CFDT has called for an investigation to determine whether the accident "was the result of widespread cost-cutting" in the chemical industry. In past years jobs have been cut at the factory and part of the safety investigation work was farmed out to a private company. Until now, however, the trade union had not called attention to any serious problems at the facility.

Three thousand tons of ammonium nitrate were stored at the plant. Even if the cause of the accident remains unclear at this stage, it is well known that ammonium nitrate can detonate when it is overheated or brought into contact with organic material such as oil or coal.

For this reason, local inhabitants repeatedly demanded that AZF—the biggest producer of fertilisers in France—be shifted out of the region. When the factory was first established in 1924, the site was far removed from the city. Today, however, the factory lies near a freeway and a densely populated suburb of the city, Le Mirail, comprising a series of tower block housing for poorer families as well as schools. Under pressure from residents, TotalFinaElf responded by threatening to close the Toulouse factory altogether and shift production to Poland. Prime Minister Jospin personally justified this stance on Friday when he stated that a chemical factory is not a fast food stand that can shift its location at will.

The attitude of the government towards the big energy companies is not new. It has always treated TotalFinaElf with kid gloves. Two years ago, following the sinking of the decrepit oil tanker *Erika*, the Jospin government accepted the refusal by the tanker's owner—TotalFinaElf—to pay the costs for the resulting environmental catastrophe.

In the suburb of Le Mirail several hundred tenants refused to return to their homes Saturday. They feared that the damaged tower blocks could collapse. Local authorities were finally forced to respond to their protests by offering emergency alternative accommodation.



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