

Scotland: explosion the result of industrial deregulation

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Three months after the event, the cause of the May 11 blast that killed nine people and injured over forty at ICL Plastics' factory in Grovepark Street, Glasgow is still unknown.

The explosion destroyed the 140-year-old building used by the Stockline division of ICL Plastics. Both workers and members of the company's management were among the dead and injured. Many were trapped for hours. Rescue workers toiled in dangerous conditions, heat and dust for days before the last victim was found.

Many of those killed and injured were from the immediate vicinity of the factory in Maryhill, one of the poorest areas in Britain. Others came from all over the west of Scotland.

Speculation on the cause of the explosion has focused on unsafe gas ovens used for setting many of the plastic components and final goods manufactured by the company. It has also been suggested that a spark could have ignited the combustible atmosphere created by a host of dangerous practices routinely employed in the factory.

Over 5,000 tonnes of debris from the building has been removed and transported to a secure location. While the investigation into the causes of the blast is likely to take up to two years it is clear that the conditions that led to the explosion were created over an extended period.

It is also clear that ultimate responsibility for the Stockline disaster lies with successive British governments and their policies of industrial deregulation. Some of the worst working and safety environments are to be found in smaller, non-unionised enterprises operating dangerous processes and practices essentially unscrutinised.

Typical of hundreds of thousands of small and medium sized companies in Britain, ICL Plastics employs only 110 staff in five locations around Britain. A small board of directors led by semi-retired chemist and chairman Campbell Downie, who owned 68 percent of the £200,000 share capital, runs the company. Profits last year amounted to a little over £40,000. Downie co-founded Industrial Copolymers Ltd Plastics in 1961.

He was not at the factory on the day, but several other members of senior management, including the company's finance officer and chief executive, died in the explosion. Downie's own son was injured, while another director lost both

legs.

The destroyed building was unsuited to dangerous industrial processes. It was designed and built as a weaving mill in 1857, in the era of Glasgow's rapid industrial expansion, and appears not to have been strengthened to resist the sort of explosions that modern plastic manufacture is capable of creating.

Production operations of this type would normally be located in industrial estates. But the elderly Stockline building was sited in a busy residential working class area, only yards from modern housing, a budget supermarket, and a busy commuter road. Residents and workers at the local Maryhill Community Centre helped those injured by the blast, only a few hundred yards away.

Conditions inside the factory appear to have been nightmarish. According to the *Scotsman*, in 1998 a worker at the factory complained about the intolerably hot conditions produced by electric and gas ovens in close proximity to each other. There was inadequate ventilation. Another worker left the factory in 1998 because of fears that an explosion in one oven would set off a chain reaction in the neighbouring ovens.

In 2000, the government's Health and Safety Executive (HSE) issued the company with an improvement notice over substances described as "hazardous to health".

In 2003, the HSE was called in by two workers, a father and son, both called Laurence Connelly, from the Cadder area of Glasgow. Both complained of conditions in the plant. Laurence senior later told the *Sunday Herald*: "The only ventilation in the room was when the doors were open. Chemicals and powders were near ovens when they were on and when their doors were open. You could see the dust from this stuff in the air. Oven doors were also left open when people were using spray paint."

One of the gas ovens was made out of the back end of a dustbin lorry. According to the experienced plastics fabrication worker, repairs to the ovens were made by untrained staff working with blowtorches beside open trays of chemicals.

Another worker, Stevie Smith, complained that the oven doors had gaps wide enough to fit an arm through. He had to hang a fire blanket over the gap to prevent himself being scorched. Spray painting was also carried out beside the ovens.

"Even though the fans were on," said Smith, "if someone was

spraying for 15 minutes, you could see a cloud of spray in the air. We were only made to wear masks if the health and safety [people] were coming in. Management knew when they were coming. That's why health and safety thought it was the best place in Glasgow."

"The management were only interested in getting the work in and the work out," he said. "It was totally money orientated... I often got burned too, but I don't know if the injury went in the accident book or not. I reported burns to my foreman, but I don't know what happened. No one was concerned if you reported an injury or not. The health and safety regime was a show."

Former HSE inspector and biochemist Andrew Rankine, now working for Glasgow University's Safety and Environmental Protection Service, told the *Sunday Herald's* Neil Mackay that the combination of powdered material and gas ovens was a recipe for disaster and that "given the conditions, it's a wonder it didn't explode before."

There are allegations that the HSE gave warnings to ICL Plastics when an inspection, triggered by workers' complaints of dangerous conditions, was in the offing. Connelly senior had alleged that an HSE inspector identified him to management as the source of complaints.

The accident serves to underline the pro-business agenda of the HSE and the diminished importance assigned by the government and its departments to workers' safety.

As a rule, dangerous faults and practices are reported and a cursory inspection is made. But then life goes on much the same as before. After the HSE's last visit to Stockline, the factory was apparently given the all clear.

The thinking behind this is outlined in an HSE document, "A Strategy for Workplace Health and Safety in Great Britain to 2010 and Beyond", in which the Labour government's priorities for health and safety are made clear.

The HSE seeks, along with its parent department, the Department for Work and Pensions, to "promote opportunity and independence, and a healthy and productive workforce". What this means is that the 3.5 million or so businesses in Britain, most of which employ less than 10 people, will face an increasingly benign environment in which the HSE's primary purpose is not to stamp out dangerous practices but to find a tolerable level of risk.

The HSE targets for 2010 call for a mere 10 percent reduction in workplace fatalities, but a 30 percent cut in working days lost. Aware of the storms of criticism likely to be generated, the HSE warn: "We will become more robust in defending the reputation of the health and safety system against its detractors, those who are overzealous in its application and those who cannot recognise the appropriate balance between risks and benefits."

While the company's production appears to be plastic goods of many shapes and sizes for purposes as diverse as bus shelters, dish drying racks, shop awnings etc., its subdivision

ICL Tech is directed towards supplying the world's police forces, armies and intelligence services with riot shields and batons. The company's entry in the "Defence Suppliers Directory" of arms contractors boasts that it is the sole manufacturer of "Superlite" limb protectors while it also produces side handled and straight batons, gloves, helmets and a "full range of polycarbonate shields."

In 1995 one of ICL Tech's then directors, Frank Stott, was exposed on Channel Four's "Dispatches" programme, *The Torture Trail*, as offering to supply journalists claiming to be Lebanese businessmen with millions of pounds worth of electroshock batons, favoured by torturers worldwide. Stott was revealed to be part of a network of suppliers, including the huge British arms contractor British Aerospace, now BAE, which could resell the batons at will. Two years after the "Dispatches" programme was broadcast, and after Channel 4 fought and won a libel action against the Department of Trade and Industry and then Deputy Prime Minister Michael Heseltine, Stott was fined a minimal £5,000 for possession of one of the batons.

Stott is also a founder of the Association of Police and Public Security Suppliers (APPSS), set up to maintain links between police forces and interior ministries worldwide and British security companies. Although Stott left his position on the ICL Tech board, he was retained as an adviser. ICL Tech itself is still a member of the APPSS.

The picture emerges then of a cutthroat minor manufacturer, favoured by the police, the British government and the HSE, all of whose protracted indifference to workers' safety at the factory appears to lie at the root of the disaster. But the investigation, which is being carried out by the HSE and Strathclyde police, is not likely to reveal any more than the immediate trigger for the blast.

Calls have been made for a public inquiry. Paul McBride QC, vice-chair of the Criminal Bar Association, said, "It is not appropriate for the HSE to be involved in making recommendations to the Crown about prosecutions if there are serious questions about their own inspection regime and conduct."

Families and supporters of those killed have formed the Stockline Disaster Group, under the auspices of lawyers Levy & Macrae, who represented those killed in the Piper Alpha oil rig disaster, the Pan Am 103 Lockerbie bombing, and the Dunblane school massacre of 1996.



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