

Britain: Inquiry to be held into Stockline factory blast

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Over three years after the event, there is finally going to be an inquiry into the Stockline factory explosion in Glasgow that killed nine people and injured over thirty on May 11, 2004.

Demands for an inquiry from the families of those killed and injured intensified following a court case in August 2007 at which the factory operators pled guilty to health and safety breaches, only to be fined a mere £400,000.

The trial exposed shocking and longstanding problems at the Stockline factory in the Maryhill area of Glasgow, run by two closely related companies, ICL Plastics and ICL Tech. Conditions in the factory were Dickensian. Safety concerns and regulations were treated with flagrant contempt, reflecting the daily experience of large numbers of workers in the small business sector.

The blast exposed the inability of the government's Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to uphold minimal safety standards. The trial uncovered a record of inspections over years following which the HSE took little or no action to address the glaring safety issues at the factory. The HSE in Scotland has a mere 68 inspectors to monitor 81,000 workplaces.

The blast was caused by a leaking pipe, which allowed propane gas to escape into the basement area of the building, which could have been ignited by something as small as someone switching on an electric light. The pipe in question was installed in 1969. According to the trial judge its installation would not have even met health and safety standards at that time as it lacked the protective wrapping necessary for use with liquid petroleum gas (LPG). Evidence presented to the court noted that £400 would have been required to fix the problem. In fact, the pipe coatings were manufactured in the Maryhill factory—testimony to the owner's indifference.

Numerous opportunities presented themselves to correct the pipe. When it was first installed, part of it came vertically out of the ground before entering the building. Around five years later in 1974, the yard outside the building was raised, burying this section of the pipe underground. Later, installation of a metal floor and the raising of the basement to prevent flooding presented opportunities to correct this deficiency; these were ignored.

The pervasive lack of concern was summed up when it was reported that the only safety inspection of the pipe that had ever been carried out was by an untrained student on a holiday job. The pipe deteriorated over the following years, leading in the end to the escape of LPG gas and the 2004 explosion.

The investigation found that as little as five litres of LPG would have been enough to cause the explosion. Stuart Hawksworth of the Health and Safety Laboratory who helped conduct the investigation, explained, "The actual leak was just outside the building which had

gone through the wall into the cellar area. It built up to the right concentration to give you an explosion. That then ignited. The explosion lifted the floor. That then released the explosion into the upper floors of the building, pushing out the walls, lifting the floors and the building collapsed as a result."

The pipe was just one of a list of problems at the factory. In the years preceding the explosion, HSE inspectors often visited the site at the request of workers disturbed by the poor conditions.

The building, an old weaving mill from the 1850s, was unsuited to the type of work carried out and there was no evidence that any measures had been taken to strengthen or improve the building's structure. Such building work as was carried out was usually of a shoddy character, and appears to have been in defiance of building regulations.

In 1998, workers raised concerns over gas and electric ovens being located in close proximity and the dangers of gases igniting due to lack of ventilation. In 2000, the HSE issued the company with an improvement order regarding the use of dangerous substances.

By 2003, little improvement had been made. Two workers called in HSE inspectors, protesting unacceptable conditions. Workers explained that the only ventilation in the factory was when an outside door was opened. Repairs to damaged ovens would be carried out using blowtorches next to open ovens and trays of chemicals. Spray painting was routinely done with doors left open on ovens.

Workers frequently reported old equipment breaking and no guidelines being given for wearing protective clothing when using harmful substances. One worker reported using an ancient cutting machine that disintegrated when he was using it. A blade shattered, severing an artery. Another worker reported being told to use a particular paint with his bare hands. On the tin it stated that if this substance came into contact with bare skin it could cause an irreversible tingling feeling in the hands.

Conditions at Stockline and the role of the HSE are examined in a very comprehensive report "ICL/ Stockline disaster: an independent report on working conditions prior to the explosion" <http://www.hazards.org/icldisaster/fullreport.htm> published by the Universities of Strathclyde and Stirling.

The report presents a picture of authoritarian workplace relations. Trade unions were actively discouraged, pay increases and other awards were generally decided through favouritism. Those who did not complain got a pay rise. Everything was subordinate to profitability. Holiday entitlements were reduced at a whim, while new work would be taken on regardless of the factory's capacity to cope with it.

Hazardous substances posed a continual danger to health. The most

common effects were felt by workers on the respiratory system, with many complaining that it was difficult to breathe freely. Coupled with this was the lack of ventilation and poor provision of safety equipment in the factory.

One worker, commenting on the prevalence of different chemicals being worked upon in close proximity with no air ventilation, told the investigators:

“Some people would be using different chemicals at more or less every bench. And when some of the ovens were on with no extraction, that was another complaint. I felt my eyes with the heat and the fumes building up—it was almost unbearable.”

The fact that the HSE had made numerous visits to the factory with no evidence of any improvement in working conditions demonstrates its impotence and/or incompetence.

HSE representatives would also reveal the identity of the worker lodging a complaint in front of the very managers who had been the subject of such complaints. Clearly, this could endanger that worker’s employment.

The report questions the very approach of the HSE to enforcing health and safety standards.

“All those features of HSE’s approach to regulating safety at ICL/Stockline stem from the ‘compliance’ regulatory philosophy adopted by HSE ... in which the trust and co-operation of managements is the primary aim of the regulatory process ... ICL/Stockline reveals the fundamental contradiction that exists in a system of regulation that is heavily biased towards the protection of managements’ right to manage, even where this involves a serious compromise of workers’ safety and health.”

This is backed up by the interview carried out with Laurence Connolly, a former Stockline worker, who explained the HSE approach.

“The last time I saw the Health & Safety [HSE] come in, it was in a wee room and that’s the only place I saw them.... They were in our department for two minutes, that was all, absolutely minutes. They weren’t there for any length of time. To my knowledge the HSE never did an investigation of air quality. But that was one of the things I had asked them.”

Another worker explained:

“I don’t know how much of the footage that you saw of the actual day the blast happened. If you ever get a chance to see any of that you look and see how many people came out there with safety equipment. A fireman commented, ‘Did everybody say “Oh there’s a blast, wait until I take all this safety gear off before I run out”.’ Nobody came out with anything on, absolutely nobody. When a building blows up you don’t have time to go and change.”

Since the explosion, relatives and supporters of those who died have campaigned for a public inquiry into the events surrounding the explosion. Many noted that due to the HSE’s record of negligence, it too should be subject to an investigation rather than being involved in carrying one out.

After the paltry fine, Angela Rowlinson, whose sister Tracy was one of those killed in the blast, said, “We are devastated, absolutely devastated. I don’t think it is a deterrent to any other company and I think they got off lightly. We didn’t get the trial because they pleaded guilty and we need a public inquiry to find out for ourselves what really happened.”

She added, “They can build anything on that site (of the factory) and they could make millions on it, so a fine of £400,000 is not enough.”

“The only thing that would have put things to rest is if there was

someone in the dock for this, but that doesn’t happen in Scotland,” she said.

In Britain today an environment has been created where businesses can operate in the knowledge that regulation regarding workers’ conditions will be minimal and largely un-enforced. Concerned primarily with providing a cheap, attractive environment for international capital, successive British governments have deregulated industry to remove any impediment to the exploitation of the working class.

Glasgow has long been controlled by the Labour Party. Over the past two decades, Labour and its business associates have coined in substantial amounts of cash to redevelop the former industrial city as an investment location, tourist attraction and financial centre. The party at national and local level share responsibility for creating the environment within which ICL were able to run their Maryhill factory, less than a mile from the city centre, free from interference or restraint.

By the same token, the GMB general union maintains a prestigious building at Charing Cross, less than half a mile from the Stockline site. The large TGWU offices are only a few hundred yards further towards the city. Why did these organisations, possessing millions of pounds of assets, and considerable collective resources, not lift a finger in response to the repeated warnings from Stockline?

These organisations have no interest in finding means through which workers in small-scale and dangerous industries can defend themselves. Rather, like the Labour Party, the unions’ primary interests lie in maintaining good relations with the employers and the government.

The relatives’ campaign for a public inquiry finally led to the announcement at the beginning of October of a public investigation. Scotland’s First Minister, Alex Salmond of the Scottish National Party, conceded that there was widespread support for the “fullest possible” inquiry.

Yet it is highly unlikely the deeper causes of the explosion will be probed by any such investigation. The SNP administration in Edinburgh is just as intent on promoting an environment conducive to business investment as was Labour. An investigation which calls into question the deregulation of industry and the right of corporations to operate free from obligations to its workforce would cut across the interests of the nationalist government in Holyrood and their business backers, many of whom, alongside huge concerns such as the Royal Bank of Scotland, are smaller outfits like ICL.



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