

Explosion at North Carolina plant leaves 3 dead, 41 injured

Hiram Lee
11 June 2009

A Tuesday morning explosion at the ConAgra Foods plant in Garner, North Carolina has left three workers dead and at least 41 injured, including three firefighters. The names of the three workers who lost their lives in the explosion have been confirmed as Barbara McLean Spears, 43, of Dunn, North Carolina, Rachel Mae Poston-Pulley, 67, and Louis Junior Watson, 33, both of Clayton, North Carolina. Seven workers are being treated at Chapel Hill's North Carolina Jaycee Burn Center, four of them listed in critical condition with burns on 40 to 60 percent of their bodies.

The Garner plant employs 900 workers in all, 300 of whom were in the building at the time of the explosion. The plant is the sole producer of ConAgra's Slim Jim product line in the United States. ConAgra also owns several popular brand names including Banquet, Healthy Choice, Orville Redenbacher's and Chef Boyardee.

No explanation has yet been given regarding the source of the explosion, which is believed to have occurred at 11:30 a.m. on Tuesday. A bomb threat had been made against the plant the previous weekend, but Garner police do not believe the threat had any connection to the actual explosion.

The plant was last inspected in July of 2008 and no violations were reported. The most recent violations on the books were reported in April of 2007 when ConAgra was fined \$625 for problems with safety equipment at the Garner facility. The ConAgra Corporation also came under fire in 2007 when one of its peanut butter processing plants in Georgia was discovered to have been the source of a salmonella

outbreak which left more than 628 people sick across 47 states.

Tuesday's explosion at the Garner Slim Jim plant caused large sections of the roof to collapse and one of the facility's walls to topple over onto a parking lot, destroying many of the workers' cars.

Interviews with survivors reveal the severity of the blast. Plant worker Harold Harris spoke with local news station WRAL from his hospital bed. "It blew me, knocked me back into the wall," he said. "When I kind of gathered myself, the lights went out, but I could see the roof just falling all around me."

Janet Bryan, who escaped injury, told WRAL "We just heard a loud explosion, and we looked up and the door to our department blew off and debris and everything rushed in."

Rescue and recovery efforts begun on Tuesday morning were repeatedly halted in the aftermath of the explosion, first by severe weather and then by concerns over the structural safety of the damaged plant. Damage to plant equipment released ammonia—used in the plant's refrigeration process—into the air further complicating rescue efforts. The plant had thousands of gallons of ammonia on hand when the explosion took place. The release of the toxic chemical into the air created a cloud around the facility, forcing rescue workers to wear protective gear and carry oxygen when recovery efforts resumed on Wednesday.

In spite of the explosion, there are currently no plans to close the plant permanently, with ConAgra officials stating their intention to repair and rebuild the facility.

But workers at the plant find themselves in financial danger due to the plant's temporary closing. Stephanie Childs, a spokesperson for ConAgra, has said workers at the Garner plant will continue to receive pay, but many workers fear that will not be adequate.

Plant worker Harold Harris pointed out to local media that many workers at the facility counted on overtime pay to make ends meet. "All that's cut," Harris told WRAL, "Now [you] just got a regular check and I don't know how some of them will survive off that. You've got single mothers, fathers." In addition to the loss of overtime pay, many of the plant's workers lost their cars in the blast.

ConAgra has donated \$100,000 to a fund set up by the company to provide their workers with additional aid. This is a pittance compared to the \$931 million in profits that ConAgra raked in last year.

Death and injury on the job remains a persistent problem in the US—one study estimating that there are between 8 and 12 million workplace-related injury and sickness per year. In 2007, the last year for which full data is available, 5,657 workers died on the job due to fatal injuries, or about 15 workers per day.

After Congress passed legislation establishing the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in 1970, the workplace fatality rate fell steadily, from 18 deaths per 100,000 workers in 1970 to 5 per 100,000 in 1994. Since 1994, the rate has not changed significantly. This is owed in large measure to the gutting of workplace regulations over the past three decades, the inability of an understaffed OSHA to monitor the nation's workplaces, lax enforcement and weak punishment for corporate offenders.

In 2009, OSHA will have only 2,147 full time employees, down from 2,951 in 1980. In 2008, OSHA managed to inspect workplaces representing only 1,451,000 workers, about 1 percent of the American workforce. The average penalty for OSHA violations in 2008 was \$1,151.

In his 2010 budget, President Barack Obama requested a small increase in funding for OSHA of \$27

million, to \$513 million total. This amounts to less than one percent of the outlay for the US military, which will receive \$664 billion in 2010—even though far more Americans are killed and maimed on the job each year than died in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact