

# France: Third fatal accident at Total this year

Françoise Thull  
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On Wednesday, July 15, a violent explosion cost the lives of two young workers, seriously burned six and put eleven others in shock at the Total Petrochemicals France (TPF) site in Carling/Saint Avold. This is in Lorraine, not far from the border with Germany. The explosion happened during an attempted manual re-ignition of a super-heater boiler, which had no automatic re-ignition mechanism. The workers were buried under the rubble of the bricks that made up the walls of the boiler.

The explosion came 15 days after the trial ended in the case of the September 2001 Total AZF factory explosion in Toulouse that killed 31 and injured 2,500. Two accidents at Total since the beginning of the year have cost workers' lives. One worker succumbed to poisonous gas on July 4 at Total Provence, and another died after the explosion of a gas truck in a workshop at Total Flandres on January 29. Four workers were injured in the second accident.

This latest catastrophe is without doubt the most serious since the opening of the site in 1947. A 20-year-old apprentice from Brittany in training for six months, and his trainer, a 28-year-old worker with eight years of work experience at the site, were killed instantly. The CGT (General Confederation of Labour) union local stated that if the production unit that was destroyed—the Carling plant's No. 1 steam cracker—"had been equipped with the same machinery as the No. 2 steam cracker unit that Total has just shut down, this accident would not have happened."

According to Claude Lebeau, the factory manager, the No. 1 steam cracker had been completely overhauled in 2001 and again at the end of 2007. After its modernization, its annual ethylene production capacity was increased to 350,000 tons a year (compared to 250,000 tons at the time for the No. 2 steam cracker). It supplied the Arkema (formerly

Atofina) chemical company's PVC subsidiary, also located at the Carling site.

Absent an automatic re-ignition device on the No. 1 steam cracker, it had to be started manually, which forced the operators to get very close to the equipment. "It's a delicate but traditional manoeuvre," Lebeau explained. "It was at that moment that the tragedy happened."

Despite this, the managing director declared during his visit to the Carling site after the accident, "We don't know the exact origin [of the accident]. The judicial enquiry is under way."

The No. 1 steam cracker, with 100 workers, can process 320,000 tons of ethylene annually, and it was the only one in service at Carling. It had been stopped on July 13, following an electrical incident due to thunderstorms at the site two days before the explosion. Steam-cracking is a petrochemical procedure by which saturated hydrocarbons are broken up into smaller molecules to produce ethylene and propylene, raw materials that make up many consumer plastics.

TPF's Carling plant is classified "high-level Seveso 2," and is therefore subject to European safety regulations for plants involved with highly dangerous substances.

Total, the fourth largest oil and gas corporation in the world, is also a major player in the chemical industry. While making annual profits of around €14 billion, the group has imposed a wave of restructuring plans and redundancies on its workforce.

Christophe Léguevaques, the lawyer for third parties in the AZF Toulouse chemical plant trial, notes that Total is the petrochemical group that has experienced the most fatal accidents: 79 deaths between 2001 and 2007, compared to 65 for the BP group and 47 for the Exxon group.

Since the early-2004 reorganization of the Atofina SA company, whose activities were dispersed between two

distinct companies, the Arkema group and TPF, Total has not let up on its restructuring plans. The Carling workforce has dropped from 1,700 in 2007 to 1,290 in 2009, and is slated to fall to 853 workers by 2013.

At the start of the year, the management of Total Petrochemicals France, which encompasses the petrochemical activities of Total in France, announced 306 more layoffs by 2012: 130 at Gonfreville and about 50 at the Notre-Dame-de Gravenchon plant, which will close definitively at the year's end.

Job cuts are also hitting research and development at Mont/Lacq (in the Pyrénées-Atlantiques region), with 25 job losses, and the head office at La Défense business district in Paris, with 33 job losses. This does not take into account jobs lost in subcontracting.

The employees at the Carling factory and Carling's inhabitants know they live next to a time bomb, as do nearby border communities in Germany. The fire chief in the town of Völklingen, next to Sarrebruck in Germany, worried about the columns of smoke he saw on the horizon because no official information was communicated to him, though mandated by cross-border protocol agreements.



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