

Connecticut power plant explosion kills five, injures dozens

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A gas explosion just after 11 a.m. Sunday at a power plant under construction in the central Connecticut city of Middletown killed at least five workers and injured more than 25 others. The blast, which apparently took place as natural gas lines were being purged at the project, was one of the biggest industrial disasters to hit the state in recent memory.

Middletown, a town of about 45,000 and the home of Wesleyan University, is 15 miles south of the state capital of Hartford.

Much of the state felt the force of the explosion at the Kleen Energy Systems plant, which caused many to think that central Connecticut had been hit by an earthquake. Scattered fires burned for hours afterward, and the power plant building, the largest structure in the project, was completely destroyed. The search for survivors went on into the night, with one local fire official stating, "It's a slow dig. There's a possibility some could still be alive under the debris."

Almost 24 hours after the blast, most but not all of those involved had been accounted for, but there was still considerable confusion about casualties. The search for victims and survivors was called off at 2:30 Monday morning because of unstable debris in one section of the plant.

There were conflicting reports on how many workers had been on the job when the explosion took place, with some officials placing the number at 100 to 200, but others claiming that only about 50 were there at the time.

The project, which was 95 percent completed and scheduled to open sometime in the spring or early summer, employed different contractors and subcontractors, and authorities had no list of who was supposed to be on duty. In earlier stages of the project, up to 500 construction workers had been employed

there.

Without a list of names, anxiety and confusion grew. A worker for the Middlesex County Red Cross told the press, "It's frustrating. They're calling the hospitals, hospitals tell them to call the police, police tell them to call the Red Cross; nobody has this information."

Names of the dead were not released pending notification of next of kin, but one worker, David Dobratz, said that his father, Raymond Dobratz, 58 years old, had died in the accident. The elder Dobratz, a pipefitter from Old Saybrook, had three children and five grandchildren.

Local hospital officials described serious injuries among survivors admitted after the explosion, including broken bones and orthopedic and abdominal injuries. Most of the victims reported being thrown 30 to 40 feet by the force of the blast. There was at least one serious head injury and one case of a fractured pelvis.

The \$1 billion power plant had been under construction for much of the past decade. It was scheduled to provide up to 620 megawatts of power, enough to supply up to 620,000 households. Its developer, Philip Armetta, had his 45 percent interest in the project placed in trust in 2007 after he pleaded guilty to corruption charges involving his unrelated trash hauling business. The plant had attracted majority financing from a Wall Street private equity firm, Energy Investors Funds, which secured \$985 million in financing in 2008 to keep the project moving.

Federal safety officials, including representatives of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Chemical Safety Board, which has responsibility for investigating industrial chemical accidents, were expected at the plant site on Monday morning. A spokesman for the Safety Board said it would be looking for the cause of the explosion.

The *Hartford Courant* reported that only three days ago the Chemical Safety Board had been considering urgent recommendations to change national fuel gas codes to improve safety when gas pipes are being cleared of air during installation of new piping, as was reportedly the case at the Middletown plant. These recommendations followed the investigation of a similar accident at the ConAgra Slim Jim food processing plant in North Carolina on June 9, 2009, which killed four workers and injured 67 others. In the North Carolina explosion, natural gas had accumulated after being purged from a new length of pipe indoors.

If the deaths and injuries in the Middletown explosion are traced back to unsafe working conditions, it would not be the first time that the primacy of profit considerations has led to disaster. In fact, tax incentives and other public financing for the Middletown plant were opposed by some consumer advocates because the new power that was to be delivered was not promised at affordable rates.

Thousands of US workers die in on-the-job injuries every year, but OSHA and other safety agencies have dismally failed to keep pace with the required safety inspections and regularly hand out penalties that amount to no more than a slap on the wrist for corporate offenders.



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