

West Virginia chemical plant explosion kills two

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Two workers were killed and two others were seriously injured in an explosion and fire at a West Virginia chemical plant Thursday afternoon.

The AL Solutions plant, located in the tiny town of New Cumberland about 30 miles west of Pittsburgh, reprocesses highly flammable potassium titanium fluoride salts, zirconium, and other chemicals for use in the aluminum industry. Six fire departments battled the fire for three hours before getting the blaze under control.

Officials with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration are investigating the cause of the blast. It is the fourth fire in the last five years and the second fatal fire since 2006.

Two brothers, 39-year-old Jeffrey Scott Fish, and James E. Fish, 38, died in the explosion. The two were neighbors in New Cumberland and lived only five blocks from the plant. Residents described the victims as well known in the community, generous and kind-hearted.

Two other victims, Steven Swain, 27, and Dave Williams, were reportedly thrown from the building, their bodies on fire. Co-workers wrapped blankets on them to smother the flames.

Swain suffered burns over 80 percent of his body and required airlift transport to the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's burn unit, where he remains on life support. The company had originally reported Swain as having died, but has since retracted the statement.

Williams, who suffered burns to his face and hands, was reportedly treated at a local hospital and then also flown to Pittsburgh's burn unit for treatment.

New Cumberland emergency services received a call reporting the explosion at 1:23 p.m. Garage doors were blown off the building and debris spread across the surrounding residential neighborhood.

Residents told *Intelligencer-Norfolk Register* they heard hissing and several loud explosions, then cries of distress. "I don't know how many people have ever heard or seen an explosion like that, but it happened quickly," said a man whose property abuts the rail line alongside the plant. "There was an almost silent explosion then a sudden 'whoosh' and the big explosion sound. Then, the flames started rolling out the doors after that explosion."

"We heard someone screaming, which was just blood chilling," one woman told local NBC television news affiliate WTOV9. "As it was happening, it terrified our two young babies. They were screaming and I went outside and it looked like someone had been blown out. He was laying on the ground and just charred."

After the decades-long decline in the region's steel and manufacturing industries, AL Solutions, with only 25 employees, is the largest private employer in New Cumberland. The town is located in the northern panhandle of the state along the Ohio River, part of the larger iron and steel region of southern Ohio and Pennsylvania.

The area suffered a collapse in industry beginning in the 1980s, with plants shuttered and tens of thousands thrown out of work. Since 2008, thousands more jobs have been cut and companies have sold off operations and consolidated.

Desperate to retain business, state and local governments have scrapped taxes and many basic public health requirements on industry. They promote the region as one with a skilled labor pool accustomed to poverty. West Virginia is considered one of the "best places to do business" for its generous "job creation" tax incentives and lax safety oversight.

One consequence of "business friendly" policies is a high frequency of industrial accidents. More than 230

workers were killed in workplace accidents in West Virginia between 2006 and 2009, the most recent period for which the US Occupation Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) offers data. This year alone, dozens of coal miners have died on the job.

After a string of industrial accidents and mine fatalities, an explosion at the Kanawha County Bayer CropScience plant that claimed the lives of two workers in 2008 prompted Democratic Governor Joe Manchin to propose nominal regulations on company disaster response. The law requires chemical and other industrial facilities to report emergency situations within 15 minutes. However, companies can only be fined up to \$100,000, regardless of the scope of a disaster, and penalty amounts are left entirely to the discretion of the state's Homeland Security office. Companies with a multitude of violations and accidents on the books are allowed to continue operations essentially without penalty.

The AL Solutions plant has been the site of multiple fires since it opened in 1991, then under Jamegy Inc. In 1995, a propane tank exploded, killing one worker and injuring another. Another fire broke out in 1997.

On July 18, 2006, a worker was killed when a similar explosion and fire ripped through the foundry of the facility. On December 21, 2006, another blaze broke out after a forklift malfunctioned, setting ablaze a tank filled with titanium. On August 2, 2009, yet another fire erupted as employees were shoveling zirconium into barrels.

In the aftermath of the December 9 accident, New Cumberland residents have called for AL Solutions to be held accountable. Articulating a widely felt resentment toward the company, Hancock County Sheriff's Reserves Captain Terry Chipps told the Pittsburgh *Post Gazette* that the factory should be closed. "I'd like to see it shut down. This company has taken advantage of the area... because there was no jobs, no nothing."

Mayor Joe Sargent, responding to the public anger, told news channel WTOV 9, "Everyone is mad at the company... In my eyes, it's about doing a little bit of both: seeing what we can do to keep (employees) safer and keep them employed in the city limits of New Cumberland. AL Solutions has always been very generous donating funds to the city whenever we have activities through the city."

Some residents have said they want the plant closed, and according to the news station, "they will be at the next New Cumberland council meeting demanding there be a repercussion."



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