

Natural gas explosion in Philadelphia kills utility worker, injures three

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20 January 2011

A north Philadelphia residential neighborhood was the scene of a devastating natural gas explosion on Tuesday around eight p.m. A nineteen-year-old employee of city utility Philadelphia Gas Works (PGW) was killed and three other gas workers are in critical condition in Temple University Hospital's burn unit. A firefighter was also injured at the scene and is listed in "stable" condition.

Prior to the blast, residents called the fire department when they smelled a strong scent of gas. A 12-inch high-pressure gas main ran in the vicinity of a building in use as a chiropractic office. The water main was damaged, possibly from the pressure of the leaking gas, near Diston Street and Torresdale Avenue, causing the gas leak to be seen "bubbling through the pavement," according to one report. As PGW and fire crews worked to locate and shut off the source, authorities evacuated dozens of people from neighboring homes and businesses, including a retirement community.

Witnesses describe a "fifty-foot fireball" shooting out from the source of the explosion. A local cameraman, Geoff Nichols caught the explosion on videotape. The body of the young DPW worker was not discovered until after the fire was brought under control. It wasn't until 11 p.m. that the blaze was officially declared under control by the fire department. A witness said the explosion and fire took down one building and partially destroyed another.

The explosion in Philadelphia follows similar events in other parts of the country. Just last month in the Detroit suburb of Wayne, two furniture store employees lost their lives and the owner of the store was critically burned in a huge natural gas explosion that flattened the building they worked in. (See "Gas explosion levels Michigan furniture store")

A wrongful death suit has been filed by the families of the deceased, claiming that the gas company, Consumers Energy, was negligent in evacuating the neighborhood before the blast.

Three months before, the massive September 9 explosion in San Bruno, California resulted in the death of at least eight people and the injury of scores more. Forty homes were destroyed and hundreds damaged.

The gas main section that caused that blast was sixty years old, with multiple circumferential welds and a longitudinal weld that was overdue for replacement. That explosion has brought to light practices of the operator, California energy giant, Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) which knowingly put off urgent infrastructure repairs in the interest of profits. (See "More evidence of PG&E cost-cutting prior to San Bruno explosion")

Throughout the US, the deadly combination of the aging infrastructure and the economic climate that encourages corporate interests to divert funds away from its maintenance and improvement insures that such incidents will become more commonplace.



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