

Two workers killed in Louisville, Kentucky, plant explosion

Naomi Spencer
4 April 2011

A chemical plant explosion killed two workers and injured two others in Louisville, Kentucky, March 21. The explosion and subsequent fire at Carbide Industries, in the city's Rubbertown area, are still under investigation, but the cause is believed to have been a furnace blowout.

The plant, built in 1941, is the only producer of calcium carbide in the United States. Calcium carbide is an extremely flammable compound used to manufacture acetylene gas and other chemicals necessary for welding and steel production. Because it reacts violently when it comes into contact with water, fire crews who responded to the explosion were forced to allow the fire to burn itself out over the course of four days.

Both of the men who were killed were longtime workers at the plant. Jorge "Louie" Medina, a 56-year-old father of nine, was a native of Puerto Rico who had worked for Carbide for 14 years. Medina died at University Hospital early Tuesday morning with third-degree burns over 90 percent of his body. Steven Nichols, 59, of nearby Charlestown, Indiana, worked 20 years at the plant. Nichols leaves behind three children and eight grandchildren.

Emergency responders said Medina and Nichols were in a control room on the second floor of the five-story building, just above a furnace where the calcium carbide was produced. According to general plant manager John Gant, the 50-megawatt furnace reaches temperatures of 3,800 degrees Fahrenheit in the process, and is about 20 feet away from the control room. Gant told the Louisville *Courier-Journal* newspaper that the furnace had been installed in 1982 and had run nearly every hour of every day since then.

After the explosion, Carbide Industries did not announce the accident on the emergency hotline,

RCALL, for 90 minutes, although regulations mandate that be done within 30 minutes of an accident to inform the public of potential hazards.

Rubbertown residents panicked in response to the dense black smoke and brush fires that the blast produced, but no emergency sirens were sounded, and the police department issued a hasty advisory to stay indoors in the absence of an official warning.

At the regular Metro Council meeting March 24, Rubbertown residents denounced the city's response and called for public hearings into the disaster. Council members refused to discuss the issue. Residents held signs, some of which read, "No threat to the community? You lie!" and "Doug Hamilton must go," referring to Louisville's emergency management director. On March 28, some 200 residents packed the neighborhood community center demanding an investigation.

Just two weeks before the Carbide Industries explosion, the city emergency alert system failed to sound sirens alerting Rubbertown residents of a tornado warning in the area.

The Rubbertown area of Louisville, like most former industrial centers in the United States, has been decimated by plant closures and unemployment. Named for its role in World War II production of synthetic rubber and industrial chemicals for the military, Rubbertown was once brimming with an industrial workforce numbering in the tens of thousands.

In the past few decades, most of the plants have been shuttered, and companies that owned the remaining factories have merged with larger corporations, including Michelin and DuPont, or been bought by private investment firms. The district lost thousands of jobs as a result; since 2008, at least three more factories

have closed, eliminating 600 better-paying jobs.

Along with unemployment and plant closures, another consequence of corporate cost-cutting has been the deterioration of health and safety standards and a rise of industrial accidents. Accidents and major leaks have prompted residents to file lawsuits over pollution and other corporate negligence. Since 2006, Rubbertown area residents have pursued several class action suits against chemical plants.

Carbide Industries has had no citations issued for safety violations over the past decade, and inspectors from the Kentucky Labor Cabinet have conducted only three inspections of the facility over that period.

Yet records with the Labor Cabinet document multiple accidents, including one in 2007 that put one worker in the hospital with burns, and another involving a hydrochloric acid leak in 2006. Workers also lodged complaints with state authorities over explosions around elevators and other mechanical equipment because of sparks, which inspectors wrote off as instances that created a “very loud pop” that could “be very frightening” but would “not create a situation in which an employee could be fatally injured.”

Plant manager Gant told the *Courier-Journal* March 23 that it was too soon to say whether the plant would be shut down for good, adding that the 140 Louisville employees and another 30 at a sister plant near Paducah, Kentucky, would be paid “at least” through the week. Some workers had returned to the plant as early as March 23, with fires still burning in the factory, to package and ship tons of calcium carbide to Paducah.

Kentucky, like most Southern states in the US, touts a “business friendly” legal and political environment for corporations, with ample tax loopholes and “incentives,” a low business tax rate, and underfunded regulatory agencies, along with an impoverished and underemployed workforce. This state of affairs has been cultivated over the past several decades to entice corporations pulling up stakes in Midwestern states, where wages and benefits are historically higher, to relocate to the South. One product of this shift has been the creation of an industrial workforce in the South that is largely non-union, temporary, deprived of benefits, and exposed to all manner of hazardous conditions.

Just two days after the Rubbertown explosion, a leak

of anhydrous ammonia forced 1,000 workers to evacuate the JBS Swift meatpacking plant in Butchertown, near Louisville’s downtown. The vapor, which is used in refrigeration of meat at the plant, causes chemical burns to the skin and lungs. One worker, whose name was not released, was sent to the hospital with eye injuries, and other workers complained of headaches. Residents within a mile-radius of the plant were told to stay indoors and avoid using heating units because of the fumes. Two years ago, a leak of anhydrous ammonia at American Cold Storage, another Butchertown facility, killed two workers and injured several others.

The two Louisville incidents last week are the latest in a series of industrial accidents in the state. On March 2, an explosion at Premium Air Systems in downtown Burkesville, Kentucky, seriously injured a worker. Michael Bowen, 31, was cutting the top from a 55-gallon drum when fumes inside ignited and blew the metal drum into his face. Bowen is listed in critical condition with head trauma.

On November 23, 2010, one worker was killed and another four were injured when a large tire exploded at Harsco Metals in Gallatin County. On October 29, three men working as contractors at the Tennessee Valley Authority power plant in Muhlenberg County were seriously burned when a build-up of fly ash they were cleaning burst into flame. On September 24, four workers were seriously burned in an explosion at Kingsford Charcoal Plant in the southern Kentucky town of Burnside.

On May 10, a worker at the Louisville Metro Jeffboat shipbuilding plant was killed in a fall. Robert Harrison, who had worked at the facility for 18 years, was killed after falling 20 feet from a walkway. Just two days later, another long-time worker at the facility died as the result of a similar fall.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact