

New Zealand worker killed in water pipe blast

John Braddock
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A worker was killed in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, while inspecting work on a water pipe on June 4. Six other workers were injured, one seriously. The underground explosion occurred soon after 8 a.m., about 30 minutes into an inspection tour of a 28-kilometre pipeline being constructed from South Auckland. Philomen Gulland, 48, a network maintenance planner for Auckland Council-owned Watercare services and a mother of two, died at the scene.

Engineer Ian Winson, 47, who lost both legs and sustained other injuries, remains in a serious but stable condition in Auckland City Hospital. Three other workers have been sent home. Director of trauma services Ian Civil said the injuries were a combination of puncture wounds, blunt injuries caused by striking objects and blast injuries from the pressure wave caused by the explosion.

It is believed that sparks from a grinder ignited methane gas in the water pipeline, setting off the blast. Nearby residents told TV3 News they had been complaining of the smell of gas in the area for "many years", but the city council had failed to act.

One of the workers, Ramon Milner, said there had been a strong smell of gas at the site throughout the previous week and he was surprised the site manager had not done anything about it. Staff had been warned not to smoke on the site.

The force of the explosion was so intense that two other workers were hurled from the trench in which they were working. James Keinzley said: "I had just left the hole when the explosion happened. I have never seen anything like it in my life, there were limbs everywhere. I saw it all. Some of the guys were cut to pieces."

Authorities have been unable to determine how methane gas got into the pipeline. Fire Service area commander Murray Binning, the officer in charge at the scene, told journalists: "We still have no idea what started the explosion."

Workers were nevertheless sent back into the pipeline within three days. Watercare chief executive Mark Ford said that although the source of the methane gas was still unknown, he was "comfortable" with decision. He claimed Watercare was "not taking risks" as it had sought un-named "expert advice" that work could resume.

At a news conference, questions were raised about the reliability and safety of the site as gas monitors had showed no presence of unsafe gas levels only 45 minutes before the fatal blast.

The circumstances of the tragedy, including the rush to resume work, are an indictment of New Zealand's terrible record of industrial deaths and accidents. In the past 12 months there have been 85 workplace deaths, the worst incidence of fatalities for over a decade. The figure includes the 29 miners killed in a preventable methane gas explosion at the Pike River mine last October.

New Zealand has about 470,000 workplaces and two million workers. According to a government report released this month, there have been 445 serious non-fatal injuries and 30,800 accident compensation claims in the past year. The report, "The State of Workplace Health and Safety in New Zealand—June 2011" noted that thousands of workers are killed or injured at work every year, or suffer from a work-related disease, resulting in "huge personal, social and financial costs."

Occupational diseases are estimated to lead to 700 to 1,000 fatalities and 17,000 to 20,000 new cases a year, with asthma, skin diseases and asbestos-related cancer among the most common illnesses. Consistently high figures are recorded in construction, agriculture, forestry, fishing and manufacturing.

Labour Minister Kate Wilkinson called for the report after a doubling of workplace fatalities over a six-month period late last year, compared with the same period in previous years. Diverting attention from the government, she said the deaths must serve as a “wake up call to employers and workers that health and safety is very serious—complacency and simple mistakes are killing people needlessly.”

The report claimed to establish “clear priorities for reducing New Zealand’s work toll and increasing health and safety performance”, but did not examine the government’s responsibility for the terrible toll or probe its underlying causes.

Through the free-market restructuring begun under the Lange Labour government of the 1980s, workplace health and safety, as with all basic rights of workers, has been undermined. Restraints on the ruthless accumulation of profits have been stripped away through campaigns against “red tape” and demands for “deregulation.” Successive cuts to public services have decimated staffing levels in government departments, including the labour inspectorate. In industries such as mining, worker-elected safety representatives were done away with in the early 1990s.

The Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 was introduced by the conservative National government, and kept in place by subsequent Labour administrations. Under the Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Service of the Department of Labour declares that its main role is to promote “self-management” of hazards in the workplace.

“Self management” means that while employers have responsibility for workplace safety, in practice there is little oversight and minimal enforcement. It is commonplace for industrial accidents to be blamed, in

the words of Labour Minister Wilkinson, on the “complacency” of workers.

The trade unions have been the direct accomplices of the governments and employers in establishing the conditions that have led to increasing rates of deaths and accidents. In every industry, the unions have enforced the demands for job cuts and production speed-ups, while turning a blind eye to the neglect of health and safety standards.

Significantly, there has been no criticism from the unions over the Auckland tragedy, or the subsequent rush to force workers back onto the job.



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