

Death at UK Sonae factory highlights appalling safety record

Danny Richardson
25 August 2011

The death of James Dennis Kay at a factory in Kirkby, Merseyside in England has highlighted the appalling health and safety record of Sonae, the Portuguese chipboard manufacturer.

Day, 62, was an agency worker at Sonae. He had been working on the demolition of a section of the factory that had been caught in an enormous blaze on June 8. Some 1,500 tonnes of wood chip in storage caught fire, sending an inferno of smoke and ash into the atmosphere. Firefighters tackled the blaze for eight days.

No details of Kay's death have been released, but it is known he suffered serious injuries and was pronounced dead at the scene. A post-mortem was inconclusive and a joint investigation has been launched by Merseyside Police and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

Kay's death comes less than eight months after the deaths of Thomas Elmer, 27, and James Bibby, 25, at the same factory after they were dragged into machinery.

The investigation into their killings revealed that Sonae had been prosecuted on four separate occasions by the Health and Safety Executive, receiving fines totaling £132,000. The HSE had ordered the company to cease work at the plant on eight occasions between 2001 and 2003 due to serious safety issues. In the same period the factory was issued four improvement notices by the HSE.

Reporting on the deaths of Elmer and Bibby, the *Liverpool Echo* said, "According to Health and Safety Executive figures, there have been 22 reports of major accidents at the site in the past nine years—including fires and chemical leaks. The dossier also reveals five dangerous near-misses, while 45 workers have been forced to take at least three days off work after suffering injuries since 2001."

In February 2003 a worker was crushed while unblocking a conveyor belt. The next month, a worker broke his leg while attempting to remove a blockage in equipment. In December 2004 a worker was badly injured when a forklift truck reversed over him.

The HSE has also prosecuted Sonae on four occasions between 2003 and 2006 on environmental issues. The heaviest fine came in 2006, when Sonae was ordered to hand over £70,000 after a dust explosion.

The Environment Agency (EA) has also been involved with prosecuting the firm. In 2003 Sonae pleaded guilty to five charges and was fined £37,500 for a series of offences relating to the pollution of local waterways.

The environment issues have been so severe for the local population that a campaign was launched. A committee representing people in Kirkby charged that emissions from the plant were causing respiratory problems and cancer. The company's answer was to raise the height of the chimney and to dismiss the emissions as just steam that will dissipate into the atmosphere.

The "Say Bye To Sonae" campaign group points out that the result is that the pollution is spread over a wider area. They noted that steam does not leave particles of dust on houses and cars.

After the June fire, there were discussions between the company and the Unite trade union that represents the majority of the workers on site. Afterwards, they issued a joint statement in which they claimed there had been "constructive dialogue" that had given the factory an opportunity to correct some of the "misinformation" that had been circulated.

Unite claimed they were "pleased that senior representatives including the regional secretary and the

full-time official, had supported local representatives' efforts to encourage informed discussions moving forwards."

Helen Moss, a spokesperson for "Say Bye To Sonae," said the aim was "not to close the factory but after eleven years in which nothing has been done and the situation gets worse, what else can we ask for?"

She stressed that the community feel the pollution problem has increased lately. It could be that Sonae is using material from a company called R. Plevin & Sons, based at Ashton Under Lyne, that is itself at the centre of a community protest.

The supplier is supposed to use "clean timber" to produce the wood chip supplied to Sonae, but Donna Liley, secretary of the community protest group, believes it is using any timber, including rough timber from demolition sites. Donna lives near the Plevin plant at Ashton Under Lyne. She is also in contact with another plant owned by Plevins in Elkesley on the edge of Sherwood Forest, as well as a Sonae plant in South Africa.

The community at Rocky Drift, Mpumalanga, South Africa, is convinced that—like their counterparts in the UK—the poor health in the area is caused by the Sonae plant. The areas around all the Sonae plants and the Plevin site have very similar health problems. They are reports of uncommon nasal erosion plus nosebleeds, runny and irritated nose, sore and swollen eyes, Asthma and chest infections, headaches and migraine.

Donna rejects claims that the dust is not harmful. She said, "The main problem here is that environmental pollution from wood recycling (dust and noise) is only viewed as a nuisance. The EA only look for dust particles of a nuisance size that land on the car, the bin, the house, etc, known as PM10. But it's the finer particles, and the invisible that are the danger. Those that will penetrate deep into the lungs and stay there. Wood dust has been classed as a human carcinogen since 1995 by the International Agency on the Research of Cancer, and demolition waste is classed as hazardous, so how much of this dust is it safe to breathe in?"

The disregard and contempt for workers safety and the environment is by no means restricted to firms like Sonae. British industry is driven by the unreserved demand for maximum profits. While in opposition, Conservative leader David Cameron claimed the UK

had become "saturated" by health and safety laws. Having taken over government he appointed Lord Young, former Trade and Industry Secretary under Margaret Thatcher, to oversee changes in this legislation.

Young declared that many laws governing health and safety are "absolute nonsense." Now the government is cutting the Health and Safety Executives' budget by an expected 35 percent, which will affect significantly the undisclosed visits its officers make to factories such as Sonae and its suppliers.

There is a campaign by industrialists to draw some of the already blunted teeth of the HSE. Changes to the laws and rules governing the health and safety regulations are expected to be pushed through parliament by the government. They are designed to free companies such as Sonae from regulations protecting workers and the environment, allowing them to reap higher profits at the expense of workers' lives and the health of the public.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact