Texas plant explosion highlights gutting of health and safety rules

Andre Damon
20 April 2013

As of Friday evening, 14 people were confirmed dead, 200 injured, and 60 more missing after Wednesday's explosion at a fertilizer storage and distribution facility in the city of West, Texas.

Residents of the small town compared the eruption of the facility, which stored the highly explosive substances anhydrous ammonia and ammonium nitrate, to the dropping of a bomb. The blast, which registered 2.1 on the Richter scale, left a mushroom cloud billowing over the town. It blew out windows for nearly two miles around and was heard more than 40 miles away.

The explosion leveled as many as 75 homes, destroyed a 50-unit apartment building and damaged a school. Most of the members of the town's volunteer fire department are either killed, injured or missing.

While the details of what caused the disaster have yet to be determined, what has been made public points to severe regulatory and zoning failures as contributors to the tragedy. The fertilizer plant was located directly adjacent to a school, park, apartment complex and nursing home. One resident remembered playing in the shadow of "tanks and silos" as a child. The middle school adjacent to the plant was closed for a day in February due to a fire at the facility.

Despite the hazardous nature of the material stored in the plant and its proximity to homes and public facilities, it appears that enforcement of health and safety regulations was abysmally lax. In this, West Fertilizer is not an exception, but rather the rule after decades of deregulation and the gutting of government oversight of private companies—a process that has been accelerated under the Obama administration.

Industrial accidents are appallingly common in the United States. Nearly 4 million workers are injured on the job each year—11,000 every day. In 2011, over 4,600 workers died from work-related injuries in the US—90 every week, or 13 each day.

The *New York Times* reported Friday that Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) records show the last time the agency inspected the plant was 28 years ago. OSHA found five "serious" violations, "involving improper storage and handling of anhydrous ammonia and improper respiratory protection for workers," the newspaper reported. For this, the company received a $30 fine.

The facility had no automatic shutoff system, firewalls or emergency management plans. In a recent filing with the Environmental Protection Agency, the facility's operators stated that there were no risks of a fire or explosion. The worst-case scenario, according to the report, was a ten-minute release of ammonia gas that would pose only a minimal safety hazard.

West Fertilizer has been cited and occasionally fined for safety and environmental violations, but no serious measures have been taken to compel the company to address the problems.

FBI officials said Thursday there was "no indication of criminal activity" in the plant explosion. However, one cannot rule out the possibility of something other than an industrial accident, given the location and timing of the event.

The town of West, Texas is located 20 miles north of Waco, where an FBI assault on a religious compound initiated a fire that killed 76 men, women and children on April 19, 1993. Exactly two years later, on April 19, 1995, Timothy McVeigh carried out the Oklahoma City bombing, killing 168 people, in retaliation for the Waco siege. The West, Texas explosion took place within two days of the anniversary of these events.

The explosion in West, Texas is only the latest in a string of US industrial disasters. Below is a partial list

© World Socialist Web Site

of such events over the past decade:

• On March 23, 2005, a major explosion ripped through BP's Texas City refinery, killing 15 workers and injuring over 170 others.

• On January 2, 2006, twelve miners died in Sago, West Virginia after a mine explosion and collapse. Two weeks before the disaster, a federal mine inspector concluded, after finding a buildup of coal dust, that "the operator has shown a high degree of negligence for the health and safety of the miners that work at this coal mine."

• On February 7, 2008, fourteen people died in a sugar refinery explosion in Port Wentworth, Georgia after plant management allowed the buildup of combustible sugar dust in the facility.

• On April 5, 2010, twenty-nine miners were killed in the Upper Big Branch Mine disaster in Raleigh County, West Virginia. A regulatory investigation concluded that the disaster was due to gross negligence on the part of the mine's operator, but fined the company only $10 million, and only one low-level superintendent was found guilty of a crime.

• On April 20, 2011, 11 workers died after an explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico caused by negligent decisions by BP and Transocean, resulting in the largest marine oil spill and the largest environmental disaster in US history.

All of the incidents noted above involved major infractions of workplace safety rules, which regulators either did not have the resources to investigate or deliberately overlooked.

Between OSHA and state agencies, there are only 2,200 inspectors responsible for enforcing the safety of 130 million workers in America—which translates to about one inspector for every 59,000 workers. As a result of severe staffing cutbacks, OSHA has largely abandoned regular inspections in favor of investigating instances where there "has been a fatality, multiple hospitalizations, [or] where a worker files a formal complaint," David Michaels, Assistant Secretary Of OHSA, told Congress in 2011.

Michaels added that, in 1977, OSHA had 37 inspectors for every million workers, while today there are only 22. Workplace regulations are being further weakened as a result of "sequester" budget cuts that began to take effect in March.

The recession that started in 2007 has fueled an even further erosion of workplace conditions, as employers have used the threat of layoffs to prevent workers from speaking out about unsafe conditions, while imposing speedup on workforces already decimated by job cuts.

The frequency of disasters and fatalities at US workplaces is rooted in the private ownership of the means of production and the subordination of all social questions to the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the financial-corporate elite. This elite monopolizes political life through its two corporate-controlled parties, which uphold the "right" of owners to dictatorial control of the workplace.

The only way to end the wanton maiming and killing of workers on the job, and the poisoning of the environment, is to establish genuine industrial democracy and workers' control over production. This can be achieved only through a mass movement of the working class, armed with a socialist perspective. Major corporations and financial institutions must be nationalized and placed under public ownership, and economic life organized on the basis of social need, not private profit.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site