

# Two workers confirmed dead in Omaha factory explosion

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21 January 2014

An explosion in Omaha, Nebraska has killed at least two workers. Ten injured workers have been taken to the hospital, four of them in critical condition with serious burns. International Nutrition, a transnational manufacturer of animal feed, owns the plant.

The explosion, followed by a fire, took place at 10 am on Monday. Workers who managed to leave the factory shortly after the explosion reported hearing a cracking sound. The noise was followed by an onrush of flames just before the building collapsed. The lights went out and, with no emergency lighting, workers with access to cell phones used their light to find escape routes.

Bernie Kanger, interim fire chief at the Omaha Fire Department, has declared that his department is now trying to shore up the building and will proceed once it is safe to do so. The entire operation is expected to take several days. According to Kanger, the area of the plant used for storage and distribution was badly damaged. Kanger called on a special team from Lincoln, Nebraska to help in the operation.

Thirty-eight people were working inside when the collapse occurred. In addition to the ten workers taken to the hospital, 7 declined medical care, leaving a total of 21 missing. A report in the *Omaha World-Herald* indicated that two workers were confirmed dead by the Douglas County Attorney. The *World-Herald* believes that possibly 15 workers are trapped inside the plant. Chief Kanger said that there is no chance that anyone left in the rubble is still alive.

Forklift operator Kendrick Houston told the *Omaha World-Herald* that he was walking on the floor of the plant when the building began to tremble, “there was this real crackling sound and the lights went off. I saw a spark, and there was a big ball of flame coming from the southwest corner of the building.”

Initial reports indicated that the third floor of the

plant collapsed, but the cause is not clear yet. Firefighters arriving at the scene put out the fire and proceeded to search the plant. Kanger declared the plant “unstable.” “It’s very extreme conditions,” said Kanger, adding, “there is significant damage inside.”

The nature of the blast as reported by eyewitnesses is consistent with a grain dust explosion.

Family members rushed to the plant for news of their loved ones. Some reported having received mobile phone calls from relatives trapped in the plant. NBC affiliate station WOWT spoke to Kari Cook, who received a text message from her fiancé, John Broderick, at 10:09 am: “Major accident, I am hurt and trapped. I love you.” Broderick was rescued by firefighters, who set up ladders on the side of the building. He was taken to the hospital with broken ribs and a deflated lung.

The company has a record of major safety violations. In 2002 a worker was killed when he fell into a mixing tank. The company was fined \$13,000. In January 2012 a safety inspection revealed six serious violations, and the company was fined a little more than \$10,000. In both instances, these negligible sums amounted to a slap in the wrist.

According to the Occupational Health and Safety Administration, there have been over 500 explosions in the past 35 years in facilities that handle large amounts of grain, such as this one. Last July there was a similar incident at a Bartlett Milling Company plant in Statesville, North Carolina. A spark caused during routine maintenance resulted in an explosion and fireball that caused the collapse of an outer wall. One worker was seriously injured in that incident. As in Omaha, the company had been cited for 3 violations with fines of \$1,900 each.

Given the scale of their operations, such fines amount

to nothing more than the cost of doing business. It is more cost-effective for these companies to engage in dangerous practices that risk the lives and safety of their employees.



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