

Omaha factory where fatal accident occurred had record of safety violations

Sean West**22 January 2014**

Two workers have been confirmed dead and four others seriously injured as rescue efforts continue at the International Nutrition plant in Omaha, Nebraska, which exploded and partially collapsed on January 20. All of the 36 other employees who were in the building when it collapsed were located, officials said, with ten workers taken to hospitals, four of them with critical injuries.

Just six hours later, two more workers were killed and another suffered head burns in another industrial disaster when a large furnace exploded at a steel plant in Madill, Oklahoma. The accident occurred at the Mid American Steel and Wire plant, 120 miles south of Oklahoma City.

Omaha's interim fire chief Bernie Kanger reported that two floors of the building had collapsed. The rescuers were in danger as unstable debris and rubble were still settling as they were rescuing five people. Both of the dead workers were located on the second floor.

The Omaha Police Department confirmed one of the dead to be 53-year-old Keith Everett. The second victim, whose body has not yet been extracted, was identified by the Omaha *World-Herald* newspaper as David Ball, 47.

Twenty-year-old Erik Ocampo received burns to the hands and face and was taken to a burn unit. A second unnamed worker went to the burn unit in Lincoln, Nebraska and was expected to survive. There has not been official confirmation whether an explosion collapsed the structure or whether the collapse occurred and triggered an explosion.

About 50 firefighters were brought in to fight the blaze. The Omaha Fire Department was forced to bring in Task Force 1, a specialty team of firefighters from Lincoln, 50 miles away from the site, to assist with the

rescue. It included heavy rigging specialists and structural engineers trained for such situations.

The dangers of production at the plant were revealed in a 2001 lawsuit brought against the firm by Travelers Indemnity Co., which provides workers' compensation insurance. Travelers sued International Nutrition when it failed to pay premiums in protest of Travelers reclassifying its risk at a higher level.

Shortly thereafter the plant had a deadly incident in August 2002, when a 45-year-old worker was killed in a moving auger conveyor, according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the federal regulatory agency that oversees workplace safety. The company was fined \$13,600 for five serious violations during the investigation of the accident. The Supreme Court of Nebraska finally ruled in 2007 that Travelers was right in its claim.

In 2012, International Nutrition was fined \$10,430 by OSHA to settle six serious violations. The report was not detailed, but violations included the categories of medical services and first aid; handling materials; general requirements for machines; abrasive wheel machinery; hand and portable powered tools and equipment; and wiring methods, components and equipment. "Serious Violations" are classified as those which could cause an accident or illness resulting in death or serious harm.

International Nutrition manufactures animal supplements and food products for feed manufacturers, animal health distributors and large livestock producers. Production at the plant includes receiving bulk materials, including rice hulls and limestone—a source of calcium in animal feed—that are held in large holding areas. Medications and vitamins are mixed in, and the finished product is packaged into 25 and 50 pound bags.

Local and federal officials issued perfunctory condolences, while concealing the decades of corporate deregulation and cuts in health and safety inspections that have allowed corporations to literally get away with murder.

US Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez said, “There are many questions yet to be answered about what caused this disaster, but I am confident that the answers provided by federal, state and local officials can offer lessons that will help avoid tragedies like this one in the future. It is heartbreakingly tragic when workers lose their lives while providing for their families.”

Monday’s fatal accidents in Nebraska and Oklahoma are the latest in a series of industrial disasters, including most recently the chemical spill in Charleston, West Virginia, which cut off drinking water to 300,000 area residents; the April 2013 West Texas fertilizer factory explosion that killed 15 and injured 150; and a series of oil train derailments and explosions in North Dakota and Alabama.

The Obama administration has done everything in its power to get rid of any meaningful restrictions on corporations, while shielding companies such as BP, Massey Coal, and the Wall Street banks responsible for the 2008 crash from prosecution.

Between OSHA and state agencies, there are only 2,200 inspectors responsible for enforcing the safety of 130 million workers in America. This translates to about one inspector for every 59,000 workers. As a result of the bipartisan “sequester” cuts, the number of OSHA inspectors is scheduled to fall even further.



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