

Building in deadly Manhattan gas explosion had history of dangerous conditions

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Newly revealed information regarding the devastating gas explosion in the East Village neighborhood of Manhattan indicates that the building at the center of the explosion had a history of unsafe conditions related to its natural gas service.

The blast last Thursday caused the collapse of three buildings and damage to several more. Twenty-two people were reported injured, including four who are in critical condition. Two additional people reported to have been in the building are missing and feared dead. On Sunday afternoon, news reports indicated that two bodies, as yet unidentified, has been recovered from the rubble. Evacuation of 144 adjacent apartments has been ordered.

Evidence increasingly points to this incident being only one of many examples caused by a long-standing failure to properly maintain, inspect and renew the gas distribution and delivery system, not only in this area, but throughout the city. (See: "The New York City gas explosion and the neglect of infrastructure")

Con Edison, the company that provides gas to the area, has now revealed that it had, last August, shut off service for 10 days to the building at the center of the explosion due to unsafe conditions, but then resumed the supply when the problem was supposedly repaired. The owner of the sushi restaurant on the ground floor of the building has stated that he was told his service had been illegally tapped to supply newly renovated apartments on the building's upper floors, presumably at the behest of the landlord.

Following Con Ed's August report of a "hazardous situation," the building's landlord hired a private contractor to make repairs. However, tenants in the upper-story apartments, cited in the *New York Times*, have stated that their gas service was barely interrupted, suggesting that the repairs actually carried out were

minimal. The apparent contradiction between the utility company's statement of a 10-day shutoff of service and the tenants' accounts is unexplained.

The sushi restaurant's owner stated that in subsequent months he repeatedly checked for indications that his service was again being tapped, but found none. He suggested that the gas to the apartments was now being tapped from an adjacent building, owned by the same landlord. On Friday, Mayor de Blasio stated that unauthorized work on gas lines may have been occurring in one of the buildings at the time of the explosion.

Whatever the case may be, an hour before Thursday's explosion, Con Ed safety inspectors visited the building and found that the repair work stemming from the August incident was unsatisfactory, but did not report an immediately dangerous situation. Company inspectors had visited twice before and found the repairs inadequate on both occasions.

Moments before the explosion, the restaurant owner called the landlord to report a strong odor of gas. Investigators state that the initial explosion occurred when the landlord's son and a contractor, who had come in response to the report, opened a side door to the building, igniting the accumulated gas.

Dilber Kukic, the contractor, was charged last month by Manhattan prosecutors for allegedly attempting to bribe an undercover investigator posing as a city inspector in an unrelated case.

Investigators are now painstakingly working through all of the structural debris in order to reach the collapsed buildings' basements and search for evidence regarding the specific cause of the explosion.

Whatever the final determination may be, the ultimate cause of this and previous such incidents is a combination of infrastructure that is well past its

projected use-life, an inspection system that is incapable of enforcing safety standards, and the greed of building owners and their disregard for safety. Gas and other utility infrastructure require constant maintenance and periodic upgrade as well as diligent safety inspection. Disaster is inevitable when these responsibilities are left in the hands of corporations and individuals whose primary goal is the maximization of profits.



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