

Three dead, four injured in boiler explosion at St. Louis factory

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Three people were killed and four were critically injured Monday after a boiler exploded in a building in the industrial area of Kosciusko near downtown St. Louis, Missouri. An engineer was immediately killed by the early morning blast at the Loy-Lange Box Company, a factory making corrugated products, packaging and shipping containers. Another two workers were killed when a van-sized piece of the boiler, which had been shot into the air, crashed into the offices of Faultless Healthcare Linens laundry more than 500 feet away.

In addition to the three killed, at least two are in critical condition and two others are seriously injured, according to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Two of those killed at the Faultless administrative office were part of a group of three new hires that were just filling out their paperwork when the boiler piece, weighing a ton or more, crushed and killed two of the three new employees.

Mark Spence, the Chief Operating Officer at Faultless, described the crashing object as an enormous “tank.” The piece of the boiler debris was 10 to 13 feet in length and at least 3.5 feet in diameter.

According to the St. Louis Fire Chief Dennis Jenkerson, one person was trapped under the boiler debris in the Faultless office. More than sixty-five firefighters of the St. Louis Fire Department responded to a call within 15 minutes. They removed the object trapping the victim, but the boiler piece was still extremely hot. The injured worker survived but is in critical condition.

More than three buildings were damaged by the boiler room explosion at Loy-Lange. A piece of pipe about eight feet long hurtled into the roof of Pioneer Industrial Corporation, although no one was hurt. The explosion blast also launched pipe into the windshield

of a nearby truck that was parked across the street from Loy-Lange.

The US Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has opened an investigation into the case and all the fatalities involved, and whether there were safety violations. According to police reports, one of those killed was 59-year-old Kenneth Trentham, one of three licensed engineers assigned to the boiler’s operations at Loy-Lange.

Remarkably, the state of Missouri requires factories in every city except St. Louis to have state inspections every two years. The city of St. Louis does not require any inspections of boilers. However, every company with industrial boilers is required to have licensed engineers on duty whenever a boiler is in operation. Trentham was one of the licensed engineers on staff with an up-to-date license and training.

While OSHA is charged with investigating any safety violations involved with the boiler, Loy-Lange, founded in 1897, has a long record of safety violations. Moreover, the company had two boilers, including the one that exploded, and both date to the 1960s.

According to the *Post-Dispatch*, Loy-Lange has been found in violation of federal safety guidelines at least three times since 2014. In February 2014, OSHA found “serious violations of standards for preventing injury from the release of stored energy by properly shutting down equipment.” The company failed to carry out its annual inspections of energy-related machines and failed to train employees adequately. For such serious violations, OSHA gave the company a slap on the wrist and fined them a mere \$2,450.

In November of 2014, the company was found in violation again. The issues then included defective forklifts operating without lights, damages to safety

chain latches, and missing guardrails on the boilers. The company was fined \$6,556 in penalties then. Recently, in October 2016, the company was fined \$3,741 for holes in the floor and aisles in poor repair.

While the investigation into the boiler is not concluded, such older infrastructure tends to fail more frequently without proper maintenance. A worker with experience fixing boilers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that boilers can explode for many reasons, including the failure of the safety valve to prevent the pressure from overwhelming the system, as well as corrosion of critical parts and low levels of water causing overheating. It is also possible that even when a boiler is functioning properly, they may leak water or air to release pressure. Sometimes safety features are deliberately removed to prevent leaking.

Given the company's long record of safety violations, he said, it was possible the boiler was damaged beyond repair but the company did not want to spend money to replace it. "The engineer may have been sent to improvise a quick fix effectively keeping a ticking time-bomb going."

OSHA's spokesperson, Scott Allen, tried to soften the seriousness of the company's violations: "Loy-Lange's past OSHA history does indicate several serious safety violations, ones that could potentially have seriously injured the workers, but we have other companies that we have on the severe violator protection program that literally have hundreds of thousands of dollars in violations. The company did come into compliance once these issues were addressed with them and paid the penalties once OSHA identified them to the company."

Allen added that while the explosion was "tragic," he hoped they could "prevent [such incidents] in the future." Such toothless statements only encourage large employers to cut corners on safety and writing off the fines as a cost of doing business.

While the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has yet to publish the statistics of occupational fatalities in 2016, its 2015 report points out that "a total of 4,836 fatal work injuries were recorded in the United States in 2015," an increase from 2014. The number of deaths in 2015 was the highest since 2008.

According to the BLS report, the majority of deaths occurred in transportation and roadway incidents; falls and slips; contact with objects and equipment; exposure

to harmful chemical substance or environments; and fires and explosions. Workers in the transportation industry saw incidents rise by more than nine percent since 2014, and they accounted for more than 26 percent of occupational fatalities in 2015.

A more damning assessment of class relations in the United States by the Center for Disease Control found that each year employers report four million nonfatal injuries and 55,000 fatal work-related injuries and illnesses, far greater than the average of 30,000 annual deaths from motor vehicle accidents.

Repeated safety violations by cost-cutting corporations and the lack of any serious enforcement by government authorities illustrate how the lives and limbs of workers are routinely sacrificed for profit. This will only accelerate as the Trump administration decimates what is left of OSHA and lifts virtually all restrictions on corporate profit-making in the name of eliminating "job killing" regulations.



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