

Workers killed in upstate New York industrial accidents

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Over the last several days three workers have been killed and scores of others injured in three separate industrial accidents in New York State.

A series of explosions and a fire occurred at 10:15 a.m. at Verla International, a cosmetics manufacturer in Newburgh, New York, a Hudson Valley town, 68 miles north of New York City. Bill Huntington, 57, was killed in a second blast when he reentered the building to make sure everyone was evacuated. Twenty-six workers along with seven firefighters were injured.

The private company employs an estimated 250 workers at the 50,000 square-foot factory where firefighters fought the blaze into the night.

Verla International was fined for six serious violations and nine in total by the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). It was fined over \$63,000 but this was discounted by 35 percent to \$41,000 as part an informal settlement with OSHA. One particular violation, the improper storage of large quantities of flammable liquids, is likely a leading cause of the disaster.

Workers throughout the US often have to tip off federal and state safety agencies, which lack funds and are chronically understaffed. In many cases, workers are temporary or contract employees who lack training on specific equipment and processes and are often fired for the slightest cause. Registering a safety complaint with management can be a sure bet to lose one's job.

The Verla International case was opened after it appears that a worker anonymously filed a complaint with OSHA, reporting unsafe conditions at the factory back in November 2016. OSHA records also revealed that the violations and initial fines were issued on April 28 of this year. The majority of the safety violations were listed as being "abated" on June 6, meaning it took the company and OSHA over a month to address

the safety violations while workers were still possibly exposed to safety risks.

According to OSHA records, this is the only safety inspection of the company, which has been in business since 1980. It is not known if Verla will receive fines, even discounted ones, resulting from another OSHA investigation.

Many of the workers at the factory are likely to reside in the adjacent city of Newburgh where the poverty rate, according to the US Census Bureau, was 34.2 percent and 46.7 percent for children under 18. Corporations exploit these desperate conditions with low wages and poor safety conditions commonplace across upstate New York.

Governor Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, in an effort to appear concerned over workers' wellbeing, dispatched a number of representatives of state agencies to the scene to assist OSHA investigators.

A second worker, Gregory Eliopoulos, was killed in the northern city of Watertown on Monday night in the city's waste water treatment plant. The details of the death of the 10-year veteran of the plant are unknown and the Public Employee Safety and Health of New York (PESH) is investigating.

A young farm worker in Lowville, New York was also killed last Sunday after he was crushed in machinery at the Marks Dairy farm. Ryan C. Ouellette was 32 years old and a father of four young children.



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