

Two workers killed at Australian paper mill

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Two workers are dead and a third is in critical condition following a deadly gas leak at a paper mill in the regional Australian city of Albury on May 24. Ben Pascall, 28, was found unconscious on top of a tank and died soon afterwards in hospital. Lyndon Quinlivan, 36, died later, leaving behind a young family. Tom Johnson, 22, remains in hospital on life support.

At least another 12 workers taken to hospital were later discharged. About 150 workers at the Norske Skog mill were evacuated. The workers reportedly went to service valves on top of a water tank in a basement area toward the end of a three-day maintenance shutdown.

The gas believed responsible for the workers' deaths is hydrogen sulphide, also known as dihydrogen sulphide or hydro sulphuric acid, which in low concentrations smells like rotten eggs. It is a by-product of the breakdown of wood fibre used to make paper.

Hydrogen sulphide is a colourless and highly flammable gas. Its characteristic smell can cause olfactory fatigue after long exposure at low concentrations. At higher concentrations, it rapidly leads to unconsciousness and death. As the gas is slightly heavier than air, it can build up in low-lying or enclosed spaces.

At this stage the cause of the gas exposure is unclear, but the fact that two workers have been killed means that something went seriously wrong.

Nevertheless, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) organiser Dave Corben praised the company's response. "The management were really good, and they will do their own investigation," he said. Corben said the union has no plan for industrial action.

The Norske Skog paper mill in Albury's northern suburb of Ettamogah has 184 workers. It is one of the biggest employers in Albury-Wodonga, which straddles the Victoria-New South Wales border, with a

population of nearly 90,000. Officials from SafeWork New South Wales, a state government agency, are currently investigating the disaster.

Last month a fire broke out at the mill in an area storing 300 tonnes of recyclable paper. About 50 firefighters battled the blaze on the evening of April 23. Even though no one was hurt, the fire highlighted the safety risks at the mill.

Across Australia, there were 187 officially-recorded workplace deaths in 2017, up from 182 in 2016. The largest number of deaths occurred in transport, postal and warehousing, followed by agriculture, forestry and fishing, then construction.

While the overall rate of workplace deaths has reduced since 2003, it has more than doubled among workers aged 35 to 44. The 65 and over age group recorded the highest death rate, likely because retirement-aged workers are having to continue working, even if unable to cope with the rigors of physical labour.

Albury-Wodonga was developed as an industrial centre as part of a decentralisation strategy during the 1970s. Heavily-subsidised industries and warehousing and distribution centres were established, but with the wider destruction of auto and other manufacturing industries, many jobs have been eliminated in the region.

The Albury mill is reputed to be one of the most efficient in the world. With 184 employees, it produces 274,000 tonnes of paper per year, supplying 40 percent of newsprint demand in Australia. By comparison, the Norske Skog plant at Boyer on the outskirts of Hobart in Tasmania employs 290 workers, with an annual output of 290,000 tonnes.

The Albury plant was built in 1981 by Australian Newsprint Mills, a joint venture of Fairfax and News Ltd, Australia's newspaper duopoly. It was acquired by Norske Skog in 2002. Following the December 2017 bankruptcy of the parent company, the mills were sold

earlier this month to London-based hedge fund Oceanwood.

Norske Skog, a Norwegian-founded newspaper and magazine paper manufacturer, had a 2017 revenue of \$US1.4 billion. It had two plants in Norway, one each in France, Austria and New Zealand and two in Australia. Originally Norwegian Forest Industries, established in 1962, it expanded via mergers and acquisitions until the decline in newsprint demand saw its share price crash in 2008, followed by the closure of at least 10 of its mills over the past decade.

Workers at the Albury mill have not been informed of any plans by the new owners but are worried that cuts may be planned. Natural attrition, without redundancies, has already seen the number of jobs at the mill dwindle over the past 10 years.

In Australia, the global drive to reduce production and slash costs in a shrinking paper market saw two mills closed in Tasmania in 2010, destroying 450 jobs and another at Shoalhaven, NSW in 2015, eliminating 75 jobs. The AMWU oversaw the “orderly closure” of the Tasmanian mills, which were deemed not profitable enough.

This was part of a wider partnership between the unions and paper companies to impose the burden of the industry’s crisis on the backs of workers. In early 2017, the trade union now called the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) partnered with the Nippon Paper Industries-owned Australian Paper mill in Maryvale, Victoria, to impose an initial 5 percent pay cut and a two-tier award to reduce new hires’ pay even further. The union promoted the pay cuts as the only way to keep the mill open.

Unions in Australia have campaigned against “dumping” of paper from Indonesia, Brazil and China. This nationalist and protectionist outlook divides workers from their class brothers and sisters in Asia and internationally, who also face cuts to their wages and jobs.



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