

Horrific plant explosion kills at least three workers in northern Chicago suburb

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6 May 2019

An explosion Friday evening at AB Specialty Silicones plant in the northern Chicago suburb of Waukegan, Illinois has left three workers dead and one still missing. The privately held facility manufactured and distributed a number of silicone products, including its Andisil brand used in cosmetics, manufacturing and other industries. At this time, the cause of the blast has not been determined.

Nine people were present in the plant at the time of the disaster. So far, one of the dead workers has been identified as 29-year-old Allen Stevens, who died of his injuries at the Loyola Hospital burn unit on Saturday. The name of a second worker whose body was discovered in the debris on Saturday has not been released. The same is true for the third worker whose body was recovered Sunday.

Waukegan Fire Marshal Steven Lenzi said it was unlikely any of the missing workers survived. "The conditions are really rough in there," he said. "There's a lot of damage. There was a lot of fire throughout."

Before the third worker's body was found, surviving workers told the press that the two missing victims are a lab technician who had worked at the facility for a brief period of time and a supervisor who may have been able to warn others to leave when he realized that there was a problem. In addition to the dead and missing, three others were treated at the hospital and two others did not require treatment.

The 30,000-square foot plant was located very close to residential areas. Residents and building owners who witnessed the blast reported power outages and structural and other property damage in nearby buildings. Buildings and homes damaged in the area of the blast could take several weeks to repair.

Video home doorbells recorded the explosion, which occurred around 9:30 p.m. Friday, with flames and

smoke billowing from the structure in the dark. Residents reported that the blast could be felt up to 20 miles away across the state line in Kenosha, Wisconsin. The Illinois State Fire Marshal and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) are investigating.

The Lake County Sheriff's Office tweeted a message at about 10:00 p.m. on Friday that it was "aware of a very loud explosion sound and ground shaking in the Gurnee area." Later that night it warned residents to "STAY OUT of the area of Sunset Avenue from Green Bay to Delany, Waukegan!! Please allow first-responders to conduct operations!! Area first-responders are on the scene of an explosion/building fire."

The Lake County Coroner arrived at the scene at around 3:00 a.m., according to ABC7 News. Emergency excavation crews took several hours to begin a search of the front of the building. Coroner Dr. Howard Cooper said that the team was going through the debris "piece by piece to make sure we don't miss anything." The excavation is expected to last at least through Monday.

Thirty different fire departments and over 100 firefighters from Illinois and Wisconsin responded to the scene. Waukegan Fire Marshal Lenzi estimates that 90 percent of the original facility is destroyed and that damages will exceed at least \$1 million. Shattered glass and structural debris littered the scene when emergency personnel arrived. Emergency crews laid sand around the site to prevent further escape of hazardous materials into the nearby river.

Lenzi also told the press that debris from the blast could be found up to one mile away, meaning that the extent of the damage caused by the explosion could be more widespread than what has already been reported.

Large pieces of concrete and other building material had been flung onto a nearby road with substantial traffic but, so far, no other injuries have been reported.

The AB Specialty Silicones web site posted a statement from general manager Mac Penman on its home page: “We are shocked and heartbroken by the tragedy that occurred in our plant on May 3rd. We are trying our best to support all of the members of our AB family as we attempt to process this terrible loss together.”

The AB Specialty Silicones explosion is the second industrial disaster in the working-class community of Lake County over the past two weeks. A toxic anhydrous ammonia leak from a semi-trailer tank on April 25 sent at least 37 residents to the hospital and prompted the sheriff’s department to issue a shelter-in-place order to prevent residents from breathing in dangerous fumes.

Lake County is home to several industrial manufacturers and distributors and also headquarters of many highly profitable global corporations, including Aon Hewitt, Abbott Labs, Solo Cup Company, and Swingline. In contrast, 7.7 percent of the county’s residents live below the federal poverty line.

Plenty of money exists to provide the necessary infrastructure, maintenance and research into the prevention of these disasters. However, local politicians would rather give tax breaks and other benefits to large corporations so that they can boost their profits.

Last year, AB Specialty Silicones completed a plant expansion to meet global demand. The Waukegan facility added a new reactor to increase the company’s annual specialty fluid production capabilities and tripled its capacity to make room for increased output and the storage of raw materials and finished products.

Workers and residents of the community should organize an independent investigation to reveal the true causes of these recent accidents. Were workers being tracked for their productivity, and encouraged to forgo safety precautions in order to speed up production? How was the facility maintained? How were workers being trained? Were safety complaints ignored or were workers penalized for raising them? This is a common practice across industries.

Under the capitalist system, workers’ lives and limbs will continue to be sacrificed on the altar of corporate profit. Far from opposing this, the unions have been

complicit in the erosion of workplace safety, while the Democrats and Republicans have gutted federal and state health and safety inspections.



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