

At least 116 injured in Russia factory explosions

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4 June 2019

On Saturday, June 1, three blasts at the Kristall factory in the Russian city of Dzerzhinsk injured 116 people. As of this writing, 17 are still hospitalized. The factory produces explosives for the Russian military, including the FAB-500, the most powerful air bomb in the Russian defense industry.

Dzerzhinsk is a city of about 260,000 people, located in the Nizhny Gorodski oblast in central Russia. A former center of the Soviet chemical industry, more than 40 percent of the population are still employed in manufacturing. The Kristall factory, built in the Soviet period, now belongs to the major state-owned defense cooperation Rostech, which employs over 400,000 people. Its head, Sergei Chemezov, is a leading member of the ruling United Russia party and was put on the US sanctions list in 2016 as a close ally of Russian president Vladimir Putin.

The blasts reportedly occurred at a unit in the factory that produces the highly explosive chemical trinitrotoluole (TNT), a standard component of dynamite. They were so powerful that windows in more than 300 apartment buildings, 70 kindergartens and 31 schools as well as several cultural buildings and gyms were shattered or torn out of the walls, spanning a radius of at least 3 kilometers. Footage of the blasts shows a major mushroom cloud rising over the city. Many buildings were also left without electricity.

An ensuing fire destroyed three storage units at the factory and two plants, and damaged the building of the factory management. The fire spread over 1,200 square meters, including 800 on the factory site as well as 400 cubic meters of the nearby forest. Some 400 firefighters were needed to extinguish the fire.

Among those injured were 44 workers at the factory. One of them is still in the hospital in critical condition. Many of the injured were local residents, including at

least one child. Most residents had wounds inflicted by flying glass from shattered windows. It is generally believed that the number of injured was reduced because the blasts took place on a Saturday, when schools and kindergartens were closed.

Nikita Tumakov, who witnessed the blasts from his apartment, told a Russian newspaper: “At 11:50 a.m. the first explosion occurred. I was sitting at home in my room on a chair, and I was thrown off [the chair]. Everything in the apartment was turned upside down. Then I went out on the balcony, began to take a video, and the second explosion came with a major wave. My balcony was shaking.” Other residents confirmed that the effects of the blast could be felt in neighboring districts of the city. The blasts triggered a panic in the city, with many residents fleeing to the homes of friends or relatives in the region.

A state of emergency was declared in Dzerzhinsk as well as in the nearby villages of Pyra, Zhelnino, and Kordon Lesnoi. Workers in neighboring factories were evacuated.

On Sunday, workers of the city administration, nearby factories, volunteers, and other local residents spent hours trying to remove the rubble and broken windows. The damage caused is estimated to be in the millions of rubles (hundreds of thousands of US dollars).

The city’s mayor has assured the population that no toxic chemicals were released by the blasts and that radioactivity in the city was not increased above the allowed maximum. However, on social media, residents have expressed suspicions about these official assurances. The Russian state and its local agencies are notorious for downplaying, if not outright lying about, the scope of such disasters.

While no official explanation has been given for the

blasts, everything indicates that gross violations of basic safety procedures at the factory were the cause. The general director of the Kristall factory had been removed from his position just before the latest blasts because of “problems with factory safety” after another explosion at the Kristall factory on April 4 had destroyed an entire shop. After all of these explosions, almost nothing remains of the original factory buildings (click here for footage).

The Kristall factory is only a particularly stark example of the dangerous workplace conditions facing millions of workers in Russia on a daily basis. On August 31, 2018, another blast at the Sverdlov factory in Dzerzhinsk, which also produces explosives for the military and is directly adjacent to the Kristall factory, killed six people.

According to a report by the Russian Ministry of Labor, 2,600 people died in 2017 because of accidents in production. This was an increase of 5 percent from 2016. The by-far deadliest occupations are in mining and construction. In stark contrast to the numbers provided by the Russian government, the International Labor Organization has estimated that some 15,000 workers in Russia die at their workplace every year, and that some 190,000 workers die annually as a result of exposure to dangerous conditions at work.

Responsibility for these deaths lies with the Russian oligarchy, which has emerged out of the destruction of the USSR by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Making close to no investments in new technologies and equipment, this oligarchy’s criminal neglect of basic infrastructure has resulted in countless fires and explosions at both factories and public buildings. Most recently, this included a horrific fire at a shopping mall in the mining city of Kemerovo a year ago, which took the lives of at least 64 people, many of them children, and a fire at a shoe factory in early 2018, which killed 10 migrant workers from China.



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