

Two workers die in Texas while cleaning chemical tank

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Two workers died while cleaning out a chemical tank near Houston, Texas, on December 28. Shawn Jarman Brown, 44, and Sidarieub Lozano, 29, were cleaning the insides of a trailer-mounted chemical tank when the two died after becoming overwhelmed by toxic fumes. Several other employees were also injured as a result of the incident.

The facility is run by Qualawash Holdings LLC, the largest single commercial wash rack operator in North America. The company operates 53 locations across the United States alone.

The facility where the two men died Saturday is located in Pasadena, a small city outside of Houston. The plant was previously a division of Alpha Technical Services before being bought by Qualawash in 2017.

Efforts to drastically cut costs and raise profits have resulted in a slew of safety violations since the acquisition.

Only last May, cleaning technician Ernesto Poblano became ill after he was ordered to enter a “sludge tank” with a shovel, bucket and nothing more than a thin protective suit. Poblano had only been working with the company for three weeks at the time.

In a lawsuit filed against the company, Poblano alleged that “numerous deadly chemicals” had burned his skin and caused him to start suffocating. The company, according to the lawsuit, did not allow him to wash off the chemicals for more than an hour after the incident and he wasn’t provided with any medical treatment for three hours. Poblano, in fact, drove himself to the emergency room after the 3 hour “observation” period by the company had ended.

In the case of Lozano and Brown, emergency calls were not made until four full hours after their bodies were found inside the tank.

The tanker truck industry in particular is infamous for

safety violations and associated employee hazards.

Tank washings normally take place after every trip as companies need to ensure that no cross contamination occurs between incoming and outgoing hauls. While these tank washes take more than two hours on average, an entire day is typically lost to washing even with the use of third-party logistic providers who route trucks to optimal wash sites based on location and wait times.

While the entire end-to-end cleaning phase can be completed without any human setting foot in the tank at all, washing companies will nearly always send employees in to clean outside of the washing docks to speed up the overall process. Oftentimes this will involve skipping hazardous material checks or neglecting to perform other safety procedures.

The Qualawash facility in Pasadena had already been cited for four other safety violations by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in 2019. Although the company’s practices were clearly leading to significant injury and possible loss of life they were only issued \$26,850 in fines for all four violations.

Workplace fatalities have been steadily on the rise in the US over the past decade. As of last August, 3,352 workers had died on the job. The total number for 2018, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, was 5,250, a 2 percent increase over the 5,147 killed on the job in 2017.

This rise in worker fatalities has occurred in parallel with a similar rise in the stock market and an overall drop in life expectancy for three years in a row for American workers.

The period from 2011 to 2018 saw an increase in 12 percent in lives lost on the job with a total of 39,150 people killed.

Throughout this whole period, the sector of the

economy associated with the highest fatality rates were the logistics, transportation and warehousing sectors of which Qualawash is a part.

As grim as the BLS workplace fatality statistics for the logistics industry, they exclude a number of integral companies and industries including Amazon, which is classified as e-commerce rather than a warehouse and logistics company even with its massive and growing trucking and logistics infrastructure.



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