

Residents, families of dead workers left to fend for themselves after chemical explosion at Houston, Texas manufacturing facility

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Two workers, Gerardo Castorena and Frank Flores, were killed and 20 others wounded early Friday morning in a massive chemical explosion at Watson Grinding and Manufacturing in Houston, Texas.

The blast was felt across the city according to several reports and left a scene of utter devastation in the surrounding neighborhoods. City officials say that over 450 homes and businesses have been damaged. Houston Police Chief Art Acevedo described the scene as a “disaster area.”

Residents in the area of the explosion were knocked out of their beds when the blast occurred around 4:25 a.m. that morning. Windows were shattered, walls cracked, doors were blown out, ceilings fell in and some structures were knocked off of their foundations. The city of Houston appealed to owners and residents of damaged homes to look for body parts among the debris following the blast. A city official told NBC News that many homes would remain uninhabitable for weeks.

According to the Houston Fire Department, the blast was caused by the hazardous chemical propylene, which is utilized as a fuel source in manufacturing and also used in the plastics industry for manufacture of polypropylene, which is a common component of many household products. City authorities said that valves in the building were releasing the chemical into the air on Friday morning.

Federal environmental and safety regulations require that a company which stores more than 10,000 pounds of the chemical files a Risk Management Plan (RMP) with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and must list it in its Tier II Chemical Inventory. There is no way to tell now how much propylene was stored at

Watson Grinding and Manufacturing before the explosion, because it never filed an RMP, nor does it include the chemical in its inventory. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, the company only listed “liquified oxygen” in its 2015 inventory.

The families of Castorena and Flores have received an outpouring of support online. Several social media posts have mentioned their names and support for their families, and their GoFundMe pages have raised thousands of dollars in the past week. Like the majority of working class families in the US, the families are unable to bear the financial burden of such a sudden loss on their own.

Castorena has left behind his children, including a son and daughter-in-law. Flores leaves behind his wife of 26 years, two children, and a son-in-law. His daughter wrote that “All who had the pleasure of meeting Frank know of his caring character and how he loved his family and friends.” Flores’ family has filed a wrongful death lawsuit against Watson Valve Services, Inc., Watson Grinding and Manufacturing Co., KMHJ, Ltd. and KMHJ Management Company.

Residents whose homes were destroyed described the clean-up process, which has largely fallen on their shoulders due to lack of any government aid, as a “living hell.” At least three families whose homes were destroyed have filed lawsuits against the company seeking damages and have also filed a request for a temporary restraining order and a temporary injunction in order to preserve evidence at the scene and to allow for inspection.

Residents have been offered no hope for help paying for the damages they have suffered by either the company or government authorities. Watson Grinding

and Manufacturing CEO John Watson reportedly told *ABC13* on Tuesday that his insurance company would pay for damages, but then immediately backpedaled in a written statement in a naked display of disdain for the suffering of workers and their families.

It is unlikely that the working class residents of Houston who have been affected will receive adequate, if any at all, financial assistance from federal or local authorities. The city has been devastated in recent years by floods and hurricanes which have forced many residents out of their homes, with virtually no help from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

The Houston Fire Department is conducting a criminal investigation into the explosion as part of its protocol and the U.S Department of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives is also assisting police in the investigation. It is unclear if the two federal agencies which regulate propylene storage—the EPA and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which has designated propylene a hazardous chemical—will conduct or be a part of investigations.

The Watson Grinding and Manufacturing facility has operated in Houston since 1972. The company provides precision machine parts, thermal spray coatings and grinding and milling services to companies in the oil, gas, chemical and mining industries.

Watson Grinding and Manufacturing has a history of negligence toward the safety of its workers, but it is unlikely that it will face any serious consequence for its recent crime. The company was fined just \$8,316 by OSHA in 2013 for two serious violations for the control of hazardous energy (lockout/tagout) and general requirements for all machines. The citation also notes that a worker had a limb amputated as a result of one or both of these violations.

The relentless drive for profit by manufacturing companies and relaxing of federal regulations to serve their interests has turned factories, warehouses and other industrial centers across the US into death traps for workers. Cuts to federal OSHA spending by successive Democratic and Republican administrations have exacerbated the problem. The number of OSHA workplace inspections has decreased annually over five years from 39,228 in 2013 to 32,023 in 2018, in part as a result of the cuts to OSHA inspection staff under the Obama and Trump administrations.

Although the company has no unions in its facilities, the trade unions have also played an instrumental role in allowing corporations to cut safety measures in the name of remaining competitive by forming joint labor-management safety and health committees to divert spending away from safety training and equipment, shifting the burden of responsibility onto the shoulders of workers themselves.

The unions routinely cooperate with company management to cover up safety investigations when workers are harmed or killed. The trade unions have been known to harass workers who raise safety concerns that could cause the companies to be fined and are rightfully distrusted by workers when it comes to their safety concerns.

Scenes like the explosion in Houston have occurred over the past year all across the world. A deadly coal-to-gas factory explosion in Yima City, Henan Province, China killed 15 workers in July and destroyed homes within a three-mile radius very similar to what occurred in Texas last week. Earlier this month in India an explosion at a nitrate manufacturing facility in Palghar region near Mumbai killed five workers and injured at least six others.



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