

Four workers killed in explosion at UK water treatment plant

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A massive explosion ripped through a large metal tank used to store treated biosolids Thursday morning, killing four workers. The force of the blast at a Geneco water recycling centre in Avonmouth, near Bristol, was so great that one of the bodies was recovered from a lake 150 metres away.

The four who died were named on Friday evening. They were 16 year old Luke Wheaton, who had recently started an apprenticeship at the plant, Michael James, aged 64, Brian Vickery, 63, and Raymond White, 57. The BBC reported “It is understood Mr James was a contractor working at the site, while Mr Vickery and Mr White were employees of Wessex Water...” A fifth worker received non-life-threatening injuries.

The workers were on the roof of the tank when it exploded, tearing it apart. An eyewitness told the media, “They didn’t stand a chance”. Others described the explosion as shaking nearby buildings. A warehouse worker said he and his colleagues had stood rooted to the spot as the walls trembled. Another said, “I thought a bomb had gone off. It was terrifying”.

Within minutes, the police declared a major incident as six fire crews raced to the scene. Specialist search and rescue teams from as far away as Exeter were deployed, using heat-seeking cameras to look for the victims.

Despite no cause having yet been identified for the explosion, which will be investigated by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), Chief Inspector Mark Runacres of Avon and Somerset Police said there were no “ongoing public safety concerns”.

Geneco, a wholly owned subsidiary of Wessex Water, takes “treated sludge” from its adjacent sewage treatment plant, as well as food waste from homes and supermarkets, to convert into biogas, fertiliser, and other products. In the process of creating the fertiliser, large quantities of highly explosive methane gas are produced.

The *Bristol Live* news site cited the comments of Tony

Ennis, “an expert in the field of fire and explosion hazards for over 25 years.” He said, “The explosion appears to have taken place in a silo which stores the output from an anaerobic digester.

“The waste is organic, for example food waste, and is ‘digested’ to create methane gas, which is the main component of natural gas—the gas can be used to generate electricity.”

“It appears likely that there was methane gas in the head space of the tank.

“Depending on the amount of methane, the pressure developed in the tank could be up to 8 bar. Pressure in a car tyre is 2-2.5 bar.

“The tank is not designed for this pressure and appears to have failed catastrophically at the joint between the roof and cylindrical shell.”

Wessex Water is one the UK’s 12 water and sewerage companies, privatised under the Thatcher Conservative government in 1989 as part of its massive sell-off of public utilities including rail, gas, electricity and telecommunications.

The GMB trade union, from the standard nationalist perspective of the union bureaucracy everywhere, complains that since privatisation the main problem is that the water industry is owned by “foreign” conglomerates, rather than UK corporations. Its research found that over 70 percent of England’s water industry is owned by overseas companies, including those based in tax havens, banks, hedge funds and “sovereign wealth funds” belonging to foreign governments.

The nine privatised water companies in England are cash cows for their corporate owners of whatever nationality. In the past five years, shareholders received £6.5 billion in dividends, £1.4 billion in 2017 alone.

Company executives, such as Wessex Water’s CEO Colin Skellett, are richly rewarded for squeezing every ounce of profit out their workers. Over the past five years,

the CEOs of England's water companies have pocketed £58 million.

Wessex Water was originally purchased by the US company Enron in 1998 for \$2.4 billion. Following Enron's collapse, it was bought in 2002 by YTL Power International, based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Under YTL, Wessex Water has seen its capital value almost triple from £1.3 billion to £3.3 billion in 2019.

YTL currently derives half of its turnover from the UK and 85 percent of its revenues from abroad, through companies it owns in Singapore, Indonesia, and Australia.

Earlier this year, Skellett told Malaysia's largest circulation English-language newspaper *The Star*, "We are contributing about £75 million a year as dividends to YTL Power from £50mil a year when Wessex Water was initially acquired from Enron."

While shareholders and CEOs in the privatised water industry see their bank balances growing, this is also at the expense of consumers. Since privatisation in 1989, water bills have increased by 40 percent above the rate of inflation, according to the National Audit Office. Some 2.4 billion litres of water are wasted in England because of a lack of investment in old and decrepit infrastructure.

A report commissioned by ocean conservation charity Surfers Against Sewage (SAS) shows that UK water companies were responsible for 3,000 raw sewage pollution incidents between October 2019 and September 2020. The report highlights 153 health incidents because of the discharge of raw sewage into coastal waters used recreationally. These included cases of ear, nose and throat infections, gastroenteritis, and more serious long-term health impacts.

The report highlights several serious failings on the part of the water companies. The UK ranks 25th out of 30 European countries for poor bathing water quality. Southern Water, whose region of operation accounted for a fifth of all water-related ill-health reports, had failed to issue a "sewage spill notification" for most of 2020.

Water companies in England discharged raw sewage into rivers on more than 200,000 occasions last year, according to the information obtained by the *Guardian*.

The Environment Agency (EA), charged with upholding water cleanliness standards, has drastically reduced its activities aimed at protecting public health, citing the coronavirus pandemic.

As well as cutting the number of water quality tests it carries out, EA has curtailed investigations into water pollution incidents. In the five months from April to August, it carried out 292 visits, compared to 1,726 over

the same period in the previous year.

Citing data obtained through a Freedom of Information request, the *Guardian* reports that despite this 87 percent decline in EA visits, the number of pollution incidents reported remains high. The agency received 9,144 incident reports during the same period, compared to 9,424 in 2019.

According to Environment Agency data, only 14 percent of the UK's watercourses are currently in good ecological health.

While the tragic incident at Geneco that cost the lives of four workers is generally referred to in the media as an "industrial accident", there is nothing accidental about the risks workers confront each day in carrying out their jobs. The drive to increase profits and shareholder value inevitably leads to cutting corners when it comes to health and safety.

The Avonmouth explosion is the second serious incident in the area in a matter of weeks. In October as much as 20,000 tonnes of scrap metal went ablaze in a fire at Avonmouth Docks, close to the Geneco plant.

In November, 100 firefighters attended a "major fire" at a tyre storage facility in Bradford, West Yorkshire. A spokesman for the local council said the incident would have "far reaching effects on residents, travellers, businesses and schools."

A fire at an industrial building in Kent in September led to 200 people having to be evacuated.

A major fire in August at a Newhaven industrial unit required 12 fire crews to bring it under control.

At Tilbury Docks in Essex in July, the roof of one building collapsed following an explosion. One person had to be treated for smoke inhalation.

An explosion in June at an industrial site in Erith, near London, caused burns to three people, requiring hospital treatment.



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