

Fatal explosion at West Virginia chemical plant kills 1, injures 3

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An explosion Tuesday evening at the Optima Chemicals plant in Belle, West Virginia resulted in the death of one worker and injured three others.

The name of the worker injured by the blast was publicly released on Wednesday. John Gillenwater, 42, of Putnam County suffered severe injuries and was rushed to the hospital where he passed away. His family released a statement saying they were “devastated over the loss of their husband, father and friend.” A benefit account for Gillenwater’s family has been set up at the City National Bank. Three other workers were also taken to the hospital, with one reportedly struck by flying metal at the site of the explosion.

According to the *New York Times*, “metal debris was blasted with such force that it was flung hundreds of feet across the river, which is wide enough for barges containing chemicals to pass in two-way traffic.”

The explosion resulted in a several hour shelter-in-place order for residents in a two-mile radius around the facility, which was located just southeast of the state capital, Charleston. Kanawha County Commissioner Kent Carper stated, “[t]his explosion was so loud that people were describing it—they thought it was an airplane crash or bomb.”

Carper stated the blast involved dry chlorinated bleach and methanol. The company released a statement that explained the explosion came when a “1,200-gallon metal dryer became over pressurized during a chemical product drying operation. The material in the dryer was a compound used for sanitization.” According to West Virginia *Metro News*, “there may have been compliance issues when it comes to the public disclosure of the operation being performed.”

The plant operated in a complex owned by the

Chemours Company, which owns another facility in Douglas, Georgia. The facility was previously owned by the DuPont chemical company, which spun-off Chemours in 2015.

The explosion was followed half a day later by the collapse of a decommissioned power plant in Adams County, Ohio, near Cincinnati. According to Adams County Sheriff Kim Rogers, the collapse resulted in the hospitalization of three workers and the disappearances of two others.

“You have to think of the families,” Rogers told *WTAP*. “There’s two families out there that have got two loved ones in that building somewhere. You have to feel for those people. I could not imagine what’s going through their minds knowing they have a family member or a loved one in there and not knowing if they’re alive or dead. It’s just a tragedy.” The facility was being prepared to be demolished this Monday.

The explosion in West Virginia and collapse in Ohio are only the latest in a series of industrial accidents which have continued to claim the lives of workers throughout the United States. According to the AFL-CIO, as of 2018, 275 workers die at workplaces daily in the US. This amounted to 5,250 workers dying throughout the entire year.

The AFL-CIO’s most recent *Death on the Job* report, published in October, ranked West Virginia as the fourth most dangerous state to do work, with 7.9 workers per 100,000 dying on the job. The US Bureau of Labor’s statistics for the year 2019 counts over 2.8 million nonfatal injuries and illnesses in privately-owned businesses. The bureau notes that workplace suicides reached an all-time high in the year 2018.

The explosion at the Optima plant occurs less than seven years after the massive Elk River chemical leak resulted in contaminated drinking water for over

300,000 West Virginia residents in the same part of the state. That leak, which contained chemicals relating to the manufacture of coal, was followed a month later by a massive coal slurry spill in the same region.

The continued risks of death, dismemberment and contamination at unsafe facilities continue apace even as risks of being infected by COVID-19 have increased at jobsites across the country. Despite workplaces being literal death traps, the Democrats and Republicans in Congress are wrangling over a \$916 billion stimulus bill that is set to provide liability protection to employers against workers that are infected with coronavirus while at work.

“This is not just about businesses. It’s about universities, charities and others who see this developing epidemic of lawsuits headed their way,” stated Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell, Republican of Kentucky, on Tuesday night.

“Tonight was a very good night,” stated West Virginia’s Democratic Senator Joe Manchin III on Monday in a comment to the *Washington Post*. Manchin praised “very bright individuals who feel very good about it, and we’re just moving along.” The potential stimulus bill will gut remaining worker protections in exchange for miserly unemployment benefits to the millions currently still out of work in the pandemic.

In addition to courtroom liability, the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has rewritten its rules during the pandemic, allowing for increased leeway for businesses to subject workers to unhealthy job conditions. As of October, the agency has issued only 30 citations for violations related to COVID-19, even though it had received over 9,000 complaints.



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