

Massive explosion at Rockton, Illinois Chemtool plant causes evacuations and environmental risk

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Local emergency personnel responded to a massive explosion at the Chemtool Inc. plant in Rockton, Illinois north of Rockford at around 7 a.m. Monday. It was classified a four-alarm fire—defined as a “catastrophic” fire—due to its continuing explosive nature. The fire is being allowed to continue and flame out on its own and is not expected to go out for at least several days, according to Rockton Fire Chief Kirk Wilson.

According to witnesses, one firework-sized explosion was first heard from the direction of the plant before more, louder explosions were heard. Soon, a large pillar of smoke was visible and citizens in Rockton were told to evacuate. At the plant itself, the 70 workers on site were evacuated safely with no one wounded except one firefighter, who was mildly injured in response. The plant is closed until further notice with no estimate done on the damage caused to the building. News coverage throughout the day showed more explosions in the plant going into the afternoon as the smoke continued to consume almost the entire plant.

All those living within one mile of the plant (consisting of roughly 150 homes) were evacuated from the area, while those in the Rockford region are encouraged to wear masks and stay indoors as the fire continues. Forbes reported the smoke could be seen from Chicago as the wind continues to carry it south and southwest. On Monday afternoon, Governor JB Pritzker sent the Illinois National Guard to the plant to ensure its containment and assist local agencies in evacuating the town’s residents. At least 40 agencies and 175 firefighters were on scene with approximately 60 firefighters from 18 departments in Wisconsin also being sent across the state border to assist Rockton

emergency responders.

The black clouds of smoke from the explosion became so large they were visible on weather radar. The massive scale of the fire and its environmental risks bring up questions regarding the nature of the company itself.

Chemtool Incorporated is a manufacturer of grease and lubricant materials headquartered in Rockton as of 2009. In 2013, Chemtool was purchased by the Lubrizol Corporation, another provider of specialty chemicals including lubricants, transportation-related fluids, and additives for engine oils. A transnational corporation with sites in North America, Europe, Asia, and Latin America, Lubrizol employs 8,800 workers with 50 total manufacturing sites worldwide and customers in 100 countries. In 2020, the corporation had a total revenue of \$6.5 billion.

The Chemtool production facilities, owned by Lubrizol, are reported to contain some of the largest grease reactors in the world and the plant in Rockton is one of its largest sites. Still, there is little information regarding the cause of the fire or what led it to spread so quickly to consume such an enormous facility. After the fire broke out and forced workers and residents to evacuate, Chemtool released a statement saying, “We do not yet know what caused this incident, but we will be working with local authorities and with our own risk management team to determine what happened and identify any corrective actions. We will share more details as they are known.”

This statement will come as little comfort to Chemtool and Lubrizol workers in light of the company’s response to another massive fire in Rouen, France two years ago. On September 25-26 2019, an

enormous fire broke out in the Rouen plant for causes that still remain unknown despite an investigation by the company. The plant contained toxic materials and chemicals that were released into the air at a rapid rate, causing numerous cases of headaches, vomiting, and eight hospitalizations. The plant already had multiple incidents in which harmful chemicals were released into the environment. Lubrizol still has yet to determine how the fire was started and has not officially acknowledged that toxic chemicals were released during the fire.

When speaking about containing the fire in Rockton, Fire Chief Kirk Wilson spoke of hoping to avoid an “environmental disaster” by letting the product “burn off” to avoid any of the plant’s materials from getting into the Rock River, about 300 yards west of the site. And while ground-level reports have not shown any diminished air quality as of yet, chemicals such as sulfuric acid, nitrogen, and lead could still spread through the smoke as it continues to push southward. A small town of about 7,500 residents, Rockton could face significant economic and social consequences from the destruction of the plant. “It’s a big employer,” Rockton Village President John Peterson told ABC 7. “Devastating for a lot of them.”

Lubrizol’s response to the Rouen fire in 2019 should be a warning to all Chemtool workers and their families, especially those in Rockton. As more information is released regarding the fire and when it will eventually burn out, workers must recognize the international record of corporations like Chemtool and Lubrizol in regard to worker and human safety. As workers are put into more and more dangerous conditions at the service of these billion-dollar companies, the ruling class continues to put them—and the population in general—at enormous risk to ensure its own profits. Chemtool workers in Rockton must unite with other Lubrizol workers in the US and internationally to demand a fully transparent inquiry into the cause of the fire and the safety measures being used to protect them as well as full compensation for all those affected by the disaster.



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