

Fatal explosion at Chempark Leverkusen in Germany

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On Tuesday morning at about 9:40 a.m., a serious explosion occurred at the Currenta site located at Chempark Leverkusen. At least two workers were killed—one from Currenta and one from an outside company; 31 other workers were injured, some seriously, and five workers were still missing at the time of writing.

“Unfortunately, we have to assume that we will not find the five other missing people alive,” Currenta CEO Frank Hyldmar told a news conference Wednesday.

If confirmed, the death toll will rise to seven. At least one of those seriously injured is also still in danger of losing his life. According to the *Kölner Stadtanzeiger*, the second fatality is a worker who was flown to the hospital in Cologne-Merheim with severe burns.

Chempark, with locations in Leverkusen, Dormagen and Krefeld-Uerdingen, is one of the largest chemical park operators in Europe. At the end of 2016, around 48,000 people were employed in some 70 companies and service providers at the various locations.

This includes chemicals corporation Bayer and many of its spin-off companies. Currenta, the operating company of Chempark, belonged to Bayer as part of its Industry Services Division until 2007. Bayer still held a majority stake in Currenta until two years ago when the Australian financial investor Macquarie took over the majority of the company.

The explosion occurred in the tank farm of the Chempark waste disposal centre in Leverkusen-Bürrig. This is where chemical waste from all other Chempark companies is recycled and disposed of. Three tanks containing organic solvents exploded, causing a fire in the tank farm. Each of the tanks contained about 200,000 to 300,000 litres and were all “completely or partially destroyed,” explained Chempark head Lars Friedrich.

For many hours, an even greater disaster loomed. Firefighters who had rushed to the scene had to wait until a damaged power line could be disconnected from the grid. The fire was brought under control by midday and prevented from spreading to another tank farm.

The explosion could be felt and heard for miles around. The Geological Survey of North Rhine-Westphalia had registered the explosion at several of its stations, a seismologist reported. The tremor was also registered at a station in the Hespertal valley, about forty kilometres north of Leverkusen.

A huge, grey-black cloud of smoke rose above the site, which is close to one of Europe’s largest toxic waste dumps. It was also visible for many kilometres and passed over Leverkusen, Leichlingen, Solingen, Remscheid, Mettmann, Wuppertal, Wülfrath, Heiligenhaus, Hattingen, Bochum and Essen. Unpleasant odours were reported even in Dortmund, seventy kilometres away.

Initially, the Leverkusen fire department issued an “extreme danger” warning. Residents were instructed to stay indoors, keep windows and doors closed and not to eat any fruit or vegetables from gardens. Playgrounds were closed as black soot particles rained down over the city and nearby areas.

As of this writing, the exact cause of the explosion remains unclear. So far, the company has not provided any information, saying it had to wait for the police investigation, which began on Thursday. Currenta has also not yet provided any information on the substances released into the atmosphere, which are most likely toxic.

“Smoke is always toxic,” notes Wilhelm Deitermann, press spokesman for the State Office for the Environment, Nature and Consumer Protection (LANUV). The office assumes that “dioxin, PCB and

furan compounds were carried into surrounding residential areas” via the smoke cloud. These substances are highly carcinogenic.

The explosion at Chempark Leverkusen is one of the most serious industrial accidents in the chemicals industry in recent years. The last time a worker was killed in an explosion in Leverkusen was in 1980.

The disaster directly raises the question of political and corporate responsibility for workers’ safety.

The police and the Cologne public prosecutor's office have opened an investigation into the “initial suspicion of negligently causing an explosion and negligent homicide.” The proceedings are directed against persons unknown. “Human error” could “not be ruled out,” senior public prosecutor Ulrich Bremer, who is investigating the case, told the *Kölner Stadtanzeiger*.

The thrust of this argument is well known. “Human error” is usually cited to blame the workers themselves for such dramatic accidents. At the same time, the aim is to deflect attention from political issues and the people who are responsible in the companies and the trade unions and works councils that cooperate closely with them.

There is much to suggest that the safety measures at the site were either inadequate or non-existent. The myriad corporate spin-offs present at Chempark suggests responsibility for safe production and disposal was also outsourced to countless subcontractors. This was accompanied by increased levels of exploitation and the endangerment of workers to increase profits for the shareholders of the various companies.

“Wind turbines must comply with gigantic distance rules, but Bayer and Co. are allowed to do whatever they want near major cities,” criticized Simon Ernst, a board member of Coordination Against Bayer Dangers (CBG), founded in 1978. Yet, “this is one of the largest trans-shipment points for chemical poisons in the region!” Bayer and Currenta must “inform the public what exploded there in the first place and how they intend to prevent it in the future.”

CBG managing director Marius Stelzmann added, “Bayer/Currenta are playing with fire. This near-catastrophe shows once again the danger posed by the production and disposal of chemical substances when they serve to maximize profits.”

The disaster at Chempark Leverkusen is further evidence of the increasingly deadly consequences of

the capitalist economic system. The safety and lives of workers are outweighed by economic interests and increasing the fortunes of shareholders and the super-rich.

In the coronavirus pandemic, capitalist policies putting “profits before lives” have so far brought death to over 91,500 people in Germany alone. Over 200 people also died in massive flooding in Germany, mainly because the necessary warning systems, climate and flood protection measures, and disaster protection structures had not been funded.



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