

“For a miserly wage, innocent people guilty of nothing died.”

Gross safety violations at Russian paper plant where five workers died

Andrea Peters
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Last week an environmental prosecutor in the Russian Republic of Buryatia found numerous gross violations at a carton paper production plant where five workers died two months ago from methane poisoning. The Selenginskiy Tsellyuolozno-Kartonnii Kombinat (STsKK), which is located on a tributary to Lake Baikal, the deepest body of fresh water in the world, is guilty of failing to meet industrial safety and air quality standards. In addition to its chemical emissions exceeding approved limits, it has been releasing pollutants into the atmosphere for which it has no permit.

On April 17, Sergei Kotenkov, age 58, Sergei Chernikh, age 64, Tatyana Antipina, age 43, Svetlana Shmakova, age 61, and Kseniya Kosilka, age 38, perished from a gas leak in the paper plant’s treatment tank. When two of the women did not appear after going to check on the equipment, a shift supervisor went to see what the problem was. When he did not return, three others went in search of their co-workers. Two of them died shortly upon entering the treatment tank room, while another woman managed to stagger out the door. She collapsed, but was taken to a hospital and survived.

“For a miserly wage, innocent people guilty of nothing died,” remarked one local resident on a social media page where workers shared the names of the dead, identified their family members, and offered condolences. “You absolutely have to have a gas gauge in such a place,” noted another. “If you yourself don’t carry it, that’s one thing, but if management didn’t give you one, that’s entirely different. I think that now they’re working might and main to try to dump responsibility directly on the workers.”

The plant’s director, Lilia Deeva—also a deputy in Buryatia’s regional parliament—responded to the news of the deaths as if they were an unfathomable accident triggered by a series of events in which the actions of the workers themselves played a central role. Speaking of the treatment tank where the employees’ died, she said, “This is not a place where regular work happens. A person went there to check the water. I don’t know what for.” She then went on to explain how, over the course of several hours, one by one, the six women and men went to this place “where regular work does not happen” and expired as a result, as if they were wandering all around the factory for sport.

Despite the gross violations uncovered, no one in the company leadership is facing jail time or criminal prosecution for the workers’ deaths. Two managers have been fired, and five more disciplined. The local head of the federal agency responsible for natural resource management, Rosprirodnadzor, is also facing accusations for failing to monitor pollution at the factory. The enterprise’s leadership has been directed to address the failures, although it is unclear who exactly must bear this responsibility because no one within the top management was named in the prosecutor’s findings.

The STsKK, which is owned by the multi-millionaire forestry magnate Evgeniy Prudze, first said it would pay each of deceased’s families one million rubles, about \$17,233. As one newspaper noted, this is the minimum required by the law and equivalent to what insurance firms pay companies when an employee dies—in other words, it cost the carton production plant nothing to hand out this sum. The payout was later raised to 5 million rubles.

The STsKK, which won prizes in the 2021 “Best Exporter of the Year in the Republic of Buryatia” competition, is well known for being a toxic pit. While the carton production process releases dozens of chemicals that pose a threat to people and ecosystems, the plant essentially functions without air scrubbers and filters, such that thousands of tons of hydrocarbons, solid waste, sulfur dioxide, carbon dioxide, and nitrogen are spewed into the air, soil, and river that abuts the plant and leads to Lake Baikal.

Groundwater and wells in the Kabansky District, where the factory is located and which is home to about 55,000 people, are extremely polluted, with the town of Selenginsk being the worst. Cadmium, manganese, iron, ammonia, tall oil, oil products, sulfate are all found at excessively high levels in drinking water in the area. When the boundaries of the nearby Baikal Nature Preserve were drawn in 1969, Selenginsk, the exact site where the STsKK factory would be established just four years later, was excluded.

The paper plant faces continuous litigation, with currently three dozen cases ongoing against it. Since, 2009 the STsKK has been named the defendant in various types of court proceedings 327 times. In 2021, Director Deeva faced administrative charges for violating rules regarding “production and consumption waste” and “environmental protection.”

In 2021, the enterprise made 1.5 billion rubles in profits on about 7 billion in revenue. STsKK’s earnings have increased every year since 2012, with the company now raking in more than 15 times what it did a decade ago. In Selenginsk, it is one of the only major employers. As of 2021, the Republic of Buryatia had an official poverty rate of 23.1 percent. A sociological study done in 2019 found that a further 20.8 percent estimate their monthly income at 11,300 to 11,500 rubles, under \$200, a month—that is, just above the official poverty line.



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