

A year after the explosions in Chempark Leverkusen the danger remains

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One year ago, on July 27, 2021, one of the German chemical industry's worst industrial accidents in recent history occurred at Chempark Leverkusen, north of Cologne. Seven workers died in the explosion of a tank farm for the disposal of chemical waste. The bodies of two workers killed in the accident were recovered immediately. Five were initially considered missing. The seventh fatality was only discovered several days later.

The bereaved families, the wives and children of the workers who lost their lives, have suffered greatly, exacerbated by the fact that the cause of the accident has still not been fully clarified and responsible parties at the company have not been held accountable.

One woman widowed in the previous year's catastrophe told the *Rheinische Post*, "I feel a part of me has been amputated." Her husband was working the early shift the day of the accident. The couple, with a young daughter, had been happy. They had bought a house and had dreams and plans. The disaster at the chemical park operator Correnta plunged them and other families into an abyss.

The question torments those affected as well as workers in the Chempark: how could the disaster have happened, and who is to blame? "I sincerely hope that those responsible are held accountable. Even if it doesn't bring our loved ones back," the widowed mother told the *Rheinische Post*. But she is only put off by the company and told that it will still take time. Moreover, her lawyer, she says, had not yet been given access to relevant files.

Chempark, with sites in Leverkusen, Dormagen and Krefeld, is one of the largest chemical parks in Europe. At the end of 2016, around 48,000 people were employed by some 70 companies and service providers located there. These include the Bayer chemical group and many of its spinoffs. Currenta is the company operating the Chempark. The company belonged to Bayer as the Industry Services division until 2007. Bayer held a majority stake in Currenta until three years ago. Then the Australian financial investor Macquarie took over the majority of the company.

The explosion occurred in the tank farm of the Chempark waste disposal center in Leverkusen-Bürriig. This is where the chemical waste from all Chempark companies is recycled and disposed of, as well as hazardous waste from external

companies. Affected by the explosion, which caused a fire in the tank farm, were three tanks containing organic solvents. Each tank was filled with 200,000 to 300,000 liters. All were "completely or partially destroyed," as the head of Chempark, Lars Friedrich, announced after the explosion.

It was clear shortly after the explosion that chemical reactions had occurred in these tanks. However, the operator Currenta only ever released information it was forced by the authorities to provide. As such it took exceedingly long before a clear picture of the course of the accident and its cause emerged.

Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) reported on June 17, 2022, that both Currenta and temporary workers killed or injured in the explosion had been given insufficient information about the hazardous nature of the waste: "In the case of the large explosion at the Leverkusen Chempark, the employees of the hazardous waste facility apparently did not have the necessary information about the hazardous nature of the waste." This emerged from a report to the state parliament from the state of North Rhine-Westphalia's Ministry of the Environment. Among other important details, information about the heat sensitivity of the waste was determined to be missing.

The report states: "From the investigations into the cause of the accident carried out so far, it has emerged that for the temperature-sensitive waste delivered from Denmark, not all the necessary information was available about the hazardousness of the waste, such as its tendency to decompose with simultaneous self-heating and volume expansion."

The report continues, "The deficiencies of information about the overall process, from waste generation to transportation to incineration, resulted in the waste being handled and stored in tank number 3 above the self-heating temperature, heating up more and more as the pressure increased, and eventually causing the tank to explode."

In other words, the workers killed by the explosion were knowingly sent to their death. Currenta's management had not informed itself and accordingly made no warnings and took no safety measures to prevent the explosion. Here again the maxim "profits before lives" applied in the truest sense.

And this is no exaggeration! In March of this year, WDR reported that Currenta had failed to meet essential conditions required for the operation of such a dangerous plant. "Ever

more new details are coming to light about the explosion at the Leverkusen Chempark. They raise the question of whether financial interests were more important than quality and safety.” In other words, the question of whether profits were deemed more important than the lives of the workers. It is apparent that the answer to this question is “yes.”

The WDR report proved that Currenta's hazardous waste incineration plant had not met essential conditions imposed on it by the Cologne district government. As early as spring 2021, several months before the fatal explosion in July, the safety control centers at Currenta's Dormagen, Krefeld and Leverkusen sites had been given “unapproved” status. In order to save on personnel, the control centers were no longer manned around the clock. Additionally, Currenta had switched to a new software system without authorization.

Reporting by the WDR magazine *Westpol* uncovered safety deficiencies at Currenta at the end of February. In an internal paper, employees reported frequent crashes of the complex technical systems in the security center, “including on the day of the explosion.” Currenta management, on the other hand, spoke only of occasional partial crashes that had no relevance to operations on the day of the accident.

This non-exhaustive list continues: On February 9 of this year there was another explosion at the Leverkusen Chempark that caused a gas leak. Only nine days earlier, there had been a deflagration on the site in which four workers were injured.

In June of this year, Currenta partially restarted the waste incineration plant.

The Cologne public prosecutor's office is now investigating four employees of the operator of the waste disposal plant, among other things for negligent homicide and negligently causing an explosion. They are suspected of having neglected their duty to take precautions in connection with the storage and handling of the waste, thus causing the accident.

The initiative “Coordination gegen Bayer-Gefahren” (Coordination against Bayer-Danger, CBG) pointed out months ago that the first three suspects were workers and not those actually responsible for Bayer or Currenta, who had merely shifted their own responsibility downwards.

“With this approach, the public prosecutor's office is going after the little people while letting the big ones go. Not the workers, rather the management of Currenta and Bayer need be targeted!” said Marius Stelzmann of CBG.

He added, “As is now known, this is about organizational failure, and those who planned, built and operated the plant are liable for this, i.e., the management of the current operator Currenta and those responsible at Bayer who built and operated the plant. Last but not least, an economic approach at Currenta oriented solely to the profit principle contributed to the neglect of safety requirements and thus to the disaster.”

CBG also points to the responsibility of politics and administration. Authorities did not carry out regular safety checks. The last time, before the accident, that officials from

the district government had visited the Chempark in Leverkusen was in 2018. Stricter safety requirements were omitted so as not to interfere with the profit interests of the corporations.

One must not omit the role and responsibility of the works council and trade union at Currenta. These organizations understand their primary task to be protecting Currenta from critical questions.

One month after the explosion, Currenta Works Council Chairman Artur Oblong made this clear during a council meeting in Leverkusen. In response to critical questions about the company's lack of transparency, he said that uncertainty—including among the general public—arose primarily because “supposed experts are quoted from wherever.”

There is indeed a great deal of uncertainty among the population. There is justified fear that new explosions and accidents at the nearby Chempark and hazardous waste incinerator could affect and endanger everyone.

One resident, Gisela Kronenberg, who lives less than 2 kilometers from the Leverkusen hazardous waste incinerator, remembers the day she heard the loud bang of the explosion.

“I immediately went to the terrace and took a video of the huge cloud. Probably every person in Leverkusen knows where they were that day. It's comparable to September 11,” she told WDR on the anniversary of the accident. Since then, many in the immediate vicinity have lived with constant fear of further serious accidents at the Currenta site.

After the terrible explosion, Currenta refused to immediately release information about the exact chemical composition of the toxic substances that were contained in the huge cloud that went to ground in the surrounding area in the form of black soot. Similarly, Currenta initially denied that groundwater or the Rhine were contaminated. It later became known that a defective valve in a wastewater pipe had caused contaminated water from firefighting efforts to flow for months into a sewage treatment plant and then into the Rhine.



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