

Explosion at Pennsylvania chocolate plant kills five

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On Friday, March 24, an explosion tore through a chocolate factory in West Reading, Pennsylvania, killing five workers and injuring 10 more. As of writing, two workers are still unaccounted for. Rescuers have been working around the clock in 12 to 16 hour shifts, digging through rubble to find the missing.

Only one person has so far been recovered alive. According to West Reading Fire Chief Chad Moyer, there is little hope the two missing workers will be found alive, “due to the violence of the explosion and the amount of time that has passed.”

The explosion at the R.M. Palmer Company plant, which employs about 850 workers and makes specialized candy products such as hollow chocolate rabbits for Easter, occurred just before 5 p.m. on Friday. The explosion, which shook buildings blocks away and demolished the two-story plant, continued to smolder the next morning. Video footage that captured the explosion showed debris rocketing hundreds of feet into the air.

No cause has been confirmed, but most signs point to a gas leak in the building.

The names of the dead and missing have not been released, but Franki Gonzales, 40, said that his sister, Diana Ceden, 45, is among those unaccounted for. Gonzalez told the media that his sister and other workers had reported gas smells in the plant and had informed management.

“Everybody’s waiting on her — six brothers. We need her back. She’s the mama hen of the group,” Gonzalez said.

Gonzales said a son who worked at the plant quit months ago over the gas odor. Gonzales said that his son and another relative had warned plant management about the smell. They were told, he said, “It’s all right. We got it. It’s being handled. Don’t worry about

it.”

Another relative of plant workers, Frank DeJesus, told media that employees, his stepdaughter among them, had complained about gas odors throughout the day on Friday.

“Everyone complained about smelling gas, and they kept making them work,” DeJesus told local NBC affiliate WGAL8. “The supervisors told them it was nothing. It was being taken care of.”

The explosion was heard for many blocks in this small city, located about an hour west of Philadelphia. The windows of one restaurant near the factory were completely shattered from the force of the blast.

“I didn’t see flames at first, just a bunch of shingles and materials falling from the sky,” one area resident said. Another resident called it “the loudest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

Pennsylvania governor Josh Shapiro visited the site on Saturday. In a press release, he offered no critical comment about the conditions that led to the blast.

Under capitalism, workers’ lives are cheap. Only recently, Occupational Safety and Health Administration fined BP Products North America just \$156,250 for the burning deaths of two workers in a preventable accident. The fine is equivalent to 0.0005 percent of the oil giant’s \$28 billion in annual profits.

Workplace injuries and deaths have been on the rise in recent years, with deaths having risen by 9 percent from 2020 to 2021, as corporations attempt to make up for surplus value extraction lost during COVID-19 production slowdowns. Since the beginning of the pandemic, work hours have also increased by about 5 percent, increasing dangers to a physically exhausted workforce.



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