

# Death toll rises in Pennsylvania chocolate factory explosion

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The death toll in the recent explosion at the R.M. Palmer Company in West Reading, Pennsylvania has risen to seven people. Ten other workers were wounded in the blast, which occurred just before 5 p.m. on Friday, causing major damage to the factory and homes in the surrounding area.

On Sunday night, one person was found alive in the rubble. They are the only survivor found at the blast site so far.

Only three victims have been identified: Amy S. Sandoe, 49, from Ephrata; Domingo Cruz, 60, from Reading; and Michael Breedy, 62.

The cause of the explosion has not been officially confirmed, though evidence points strongly to a gas leak. State police have been secretive about their investigation, refusing to answer any questions related to the investigation.

In the days following the explosion, Frankie Gonzalez, whose sister, Diana Cedeno, 45, is among the workers still unaccounted for, reported that multiple workers at the factory had been complaining of smelling gas in the factory—to which, he said, management replied, “‘It’s all right. We got it. It’s being handled. Don’t worry about it.’”

Frank DeJesus, another relative of a plant worker, substantiated these claims. He told media that workers at the plant, among them his stepdaughter, had informed company management about gas odors throughout the day on Friday. “Everyone complained about smelling gas, and they kept making them work,” DeJesus said. “The supervisors told them it was nothing. It was being taken care of.” Reports have emerged of other plant workers also complaining about the gas smell. But they had been told that management would “deal with it.”

The dead and missing leave behind grieving families.

“This pain I feel is unimaginable but I try to stay strong for you mami,” said Kerlyana Torres Cedeno in a social media post about her mother. Authorities have warned that the chances for survival are narrow “due to the violence of the explosion and the amount of time that has passed.”

One area resident, Betty Wright, who suffered injuries and whose home has been condemned as a result of the disaster, filed suit Monday in Philadelphia County Court against R.M. Palmer Co. for negligence. The suit notes that Wright was thrown across the room by the force of the blast, suffering severe injuries as a result, in addition to loss of property. Wright will seek damages on the basis of company negligence, with the filing suggesting that her attorneys believe a gas leak is the culprit.

“This is my mother... She lost every single item she owns including my father’s urn. She is homeless with literally just the clothes she had on her back when they took her out of the window,” stated Carly Geisler on social media in response to comments about her mother’s lawsuit. “She’s a widow on a fixed income who lived alone in that apartment and now has nothing.”

Area residents have banded together, raising thousands of dollars to help families of those affected by the disaster. The Berks County Community Foundation along with United Ways of Berks County have raised \$107,000.

Meanwhile, the Biden White House as well as other local governments have sent condolences to the community. Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro also visited the site a few days ago to assess the damage and make some remarks. Shapiro also ordered that all Pennsylvania Commonwealth flags be lowered at half-staff.

These are meaningless gestures that will do nothing to make the families of the victims whole. In fact, Republicans and Democrats alike have overseen a dramatic intensification of the exploitation of workers, leading to a growing number of injuries and deaths. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 5,190 fatal work injuries recorded in the US in 2021, a 9 percent increase over the previous year.

This says nothing about the 1.12 million Americans as of March 28, 2023, who have officially died from COVID-19, of which the real figure is far higher. The drive to return workers to factories coming out of the half-hearted COVID-19 shutdown was part of a ratcheting up of labor exploitation to support the share values and other paper claims of American capitalism.



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