

First lawsuit filed against Pennsylvania chocolate factory owner, vigil for 7 workers killed in explosion

Landon Gourov
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Friday, April 14, marked three weeks since the deadly and preventable explosion at the chocolate factory owned by R.M. Palmer Company in West Reading, Pennsylvania.

As the investigation continues into the blast, more evidence has surfaced that R.M. Palmer management was aware of the gas leak and blatantly ignored it. Management then continued production despite the hazardous conditions, confirming surviving workers' statements made immediately after the deadly tragedy.

Initial autopsy reports have determined that all seven died from blast injuries. At least 10 additional workers suffered mild to severe injuries. The blast was so powerful it shattered windows, knocked people over and caused damage to the broader community.

Federal investigators and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) have focused on the natural gas leak at the company. NTSB spokesperson Keith Holloway said the board is "continuing to gather evidence about how the building was supplied with natural gas and point of ignition, interview witnesses, examine the pipeline for fractures, any damage to pipeline, a chronology of events leading up to the explosion, among other issues that may come up as the investigation continues."

On Thursday, the R.M. Palmer Company released its first statement on the deadly blast, saying that the NTSB investigation precludes further public comment and that "employees' safety and health has always been, and will continue to be, of paramount importance."

While more evidence emerges of transgressions and criminality, the family members of Judith "Judy" Lopez-Moran, a 55-year-old mother of three who died

during the tragedy, have filed a wrongful death lawsuit.

According to the law firm Saltz, Mongeluzzi & Bendesky P.C. (SMB), "the horrific explosion ... was foreseeable, predictable, and preventable." R.M. Palmer "did nothing" when Lopez-Moran and her coworkers voiced safety concerns over the smell of flammable gas throughout the facility, just 30 minutes before the explosion.

Instead of evacuating, Palmer directed onsite management "to mislead factory workers." The company falsely claimed the gas smell was normal and the factory was safe, "so that the factory workers would continue working and so that factory downtime would be minimized."

The law firm has also previously represented families and individuals in a 2022 Pottstown, Pennsylvania, residential gas explosion and in a destructive 2019 blast in Philadelphia that flattened five row houses. Many more lawsuits from family members of the victims, survivors and those impacted in the community are expected to follow.

On March 31, families and friends of the deceased, along with coworkers and the local community, commemorated the seven victims in a moving vigil at the city's fire department: Amy S. Sandoe, 49, of Ephrata; Domingo Cruz, 60, of Reading; Xiorkey D. Nunez, 30, of Reading; Susan H. Halvonik, 63, of Upper Providence Township; Michael D. Breedy, 62, of Marion Township; Diana M. Cedeno, 44, of Reading; and Judith Lopez-Moran, 55, of Reading.

Many of those who attended the vigil displayed pictures and placards of the dead. Mourners expressed both sadness and anger over the disaster. Some demanded answers. Jennifer Aeames, a worker at the

factory, described the waves of feelings after the event. “A roller coaster of emotions,” she said. “Sad, confused, trying to heal.” Bambi Cipolla lost her friend Susan H. Halvonik. “It’s been tough. One of my girlfriends was Sue, who passed away. We had the funeral today.”

One worker who survived the blast slammed the company over its catastrophic decision on social media:

I will not be buying any chocolate from RM palmers to help keep their “business” from shutting down!! I was there during that explosion and I let my supervisor know of the strong odor of gas. She did nothing, she kept packing chocolate.

At that moment is when every employee should have been evacuated but instead they expected us to put our life on the line to pack chocolate,... I hold [management] DONNA NEWMAN responsible for the 7 lives that have been lost. Due to her being irresponsible we lost our coworker, family, and friends.

Another online attendee of the vigil pointed to the profit-over-lives mentality of the capitalist system, writing underneath candles and the pictures of former loved ones:

It’s a shame they apparently put profit over people (from the reports I’ve read employees were complaining since at least early morning of gas odors but were told it’s ok we have everything under control, we got this etc. in other words just get back to work!) A responsible employer who actually cares about their employees should have an evacuation plan in place and employed it immediately until the situation was determined safe by the fire department and gas works/UGI. My heart goes out to the workers and their families as for the management I hope they pay dearly for their lack of care for people’s lives.

Patricia Borges, an attendee and survivor still convalescing in the hospital, described her ordeal to the local and national press.

After the fire burst through the building, “I began to burn, I thought it was the end for me.” She then plummeted into a pool of liquid chocolate extinguishing the fire but breaking her collarbone and ankles. Once fire rescuers put out the flames, she managed to escape the chocolate pool before drowning.

Borges, in her interview with the Associated Press, revealed that workers warned management about the unmistakable smell of gas days, months and even 30 minutes before the explosion. The sheer volume of leaking gas nauseated workers. She also asked a supervisor about evacuation procedures, but the individual refused to issue them. Instead, they said that off-site management would have to make this life-or-death decision. In another piece of damning evidence for R.M. Palmer Company, the local gas company, UGI Utilities, said no gas leak reports had been delivered from the building.

Facing many lawsuits from families, workers and the community, R.M. Palmer has refused to comment on the explosion other than a public statement shortly after the incident. All questions have been directed to the NTSB. On its Facebook page, the company has censored commenting for fear of a public backlash.



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