

One worker dies and at least one other injured in asphalt tank explosion near Illinois refinery

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One worker was killed and at least one other worker was injured when an asphalt tank exploded at the facilities of Seneca Petroleum in Lemont, Illinois, a southwestern suburb of Chicago. Another worker was transported to Silver Cross Hospital with minor injuries, according to a press release from the Lemont Fire District.

The worker who was killed was identified as 25-year-old Dru Worker, a resident of south suburban Homewood. Both workers were employed by M&J Industrial Services, a contractor that services industrial facilities. M&J issued a statement saying the company was “deeply saddened” and said that “Although the equipment involved was not owned or operated by our company, we are cooperating with federal and state authorities in their investigation.”

According to reports, the tank exploded around 9:30 a.m. and the fire was extinguished by 10:30 a.m. It is unclear precisely how many other workers may have been injured in the explosion and fire, as the Lemont Fire District’s press release said, “district units arrived on the scene at 9:42 a.m. and reported a working fire involving an asphalt storage tank with numerous injuries.”

Seneca Petroleum is a producer of asphalt used in road construction, and the company is one of only a few approved suppliers for the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT). Its facility in Lemont is located adjacent to Citgo’s sprawling Lemont Refinery, from which it draws raw material.

Asphalt tanks have long been known to be at risk of catching fire and exploding due to the build-up of vapors as the materials are heated and stored. A 2021 article from *Inside Climate News* noted at least 17

reported explosions at asphalt plants and terminals around the country over the past decade, with a likelihood of many more unreported incidents. The article also noted that companies have increased the use of additives to their formulations over the past 30 years to enhance their products but which also increase vapor pressure.

An Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) spokesperson said, “OSHA has opened an investigation with a contractor on the site, M&J Industrial Services, where one of their employees was fatally injured and another was injured at a workplace incident at Seneca Petroleum Company in Lemont, IL.” The Will County Coroner’s Office and Illinois State Fire Marshal are also said to be investigating the explosion.

Dru Worker was identified by friends and colleagues as an assistant wrestling coach at Victor J. Andrew High School in Tinley Park. The school district said Worker “helped instill confidence and sportsmanship in our T-Bolts.” Worker was previously an all-state wrestler in high school as well as a state champion with the Tinley Park Bulldogs Wrestling Club.

Edward Ortiz, a coach for the Bulldogs, told ABC 7, “It’s going to be a loss in the community. Somebody who volunteers their time, you know, especially with the kids. It’s going to be rough for the kids. I feel for them.” A neighbor told NBC 5 Chicago, “He just worked all the time. He was a good young man. And it is unfortunate that he is now gone. It’s a terrible loss for the neighborhood.”

Worker’s death adds to the increasing toll exacted by America’s industrial slaughterhouse. Other recent deaths at US refineries include brothers Ben and Max

Morrissey, aged 32 and 34, who were burned to death in an explosion at the BP Husky refinery in Oregon, Ohio in September 2022, as well as 25-year-old contractor Alfredo Reyes, who was electrocuted at Marathon's Galveston Bay refinery in Texas in February.

Other industrial deaths in Illinois in the past year have included that of Steven Dierkes, a 39-year-old worker who was horrifically killed when he fell into the crucible at Caterpillar's Mapleton foundry in June 2022, Casen Garcia, a 22-year-old worker killed at the Tyson Foods plant in Joslin in July 2022, and Travis Baker, a 49-year-old father of four who died after injuries sustained at Stellantis' Belvidere assembly plant in August 2022.

Notably, social media for USW Local 7-517, which represents workers at Citgo, Seneca and Oxbow Calcining, have so far made no comment on Worker's death.



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