

2 firefighters dead and at least 6 injured in effort to extinguish cargo ship blaze at Port Newark, New Jersey

Philip Guelpa
10 July 2023

A fire on a cargo ship in Port Newark, New Jersey, which has been burning since Wednesday evening, has resulted in the deaths of two Newark firefighters.

Augusto Acabou, 45, and Wayne Brooks Jr., 49, were both veterans of the fire department, with nine and 16.5 years of experience, respectively. They were reportedly trapped on board the vessel during the initial response. At least six more firefighters have been injured, a testimony to the extremely dangerous nature of the fire.

The ship, the *Grande Costa d'Avorio*, has a cargo of 1,200 vehicles destined for export to West Africa. They are partially filled with gasoline and oil, which fueled the fire and caused multiple explosions. The blaze has raised the potential for the release of hazardous materials into the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area, the most densely populated region in the United States. The danger was compounded by the possibility that the water being sprayed onto the vessel in the firefighting effort could cause it to capsize, releasing even more pollutants into Newark Bay.

US Coast Guard officials have now said the fire is contained, have reopened the channel to traffic at Port Newark, and the port resumed operations on Monday morning.

Firefighters from multiple municipalities, including Jersey City, Newark, Elizabeth and numerous others have been called in to fight the blaze, which reportedly developed out of control due to inadequate resources being available initially. Anthony Tarantino, president of the Newark Fire Officers Union, told NJ.com that the hoses available at the start of the effort to suppress the blaze were too small and could not provide an adequate volume of water.

According to Tarantino, “We are capable of handling any fire, but the combination of fighting a fire in the equivalent of a 12-story building on a ship with 1-inch diameter hose, which does not provide the protection, reach and ability to put out the volume of fire, caused the deaths of our brave brothers.”

Fire Chief Rufus Jackson stated that Newark firefighters had received some training in the past regarding how to fight fires on a passenger ship but not on a cargo ship of that size.

The fire, which burned at high temperatures, had been spewing thick, black smoke. This has exacerbated air pollution in the New York metro area, which already has poor air quality, recently compounded by smoke from Canadian wildfires, although, according to AirNow.gov the air quality in the area is now “good.”

A representative of the US Coast Guard, which is directing the firefighting effort, has acknowledged the potential for severe environmental impacts. It is unclear to what extent this remains the case, including the danger to dockworkers who must operate nearby, but millions of dollars were being lost when the port was closed and there is every incentive by the authorities to resume operations prematurely.

The president of Gallagher Marine Systems, the company responsible for the salvage effort, has reported that concentrations of sulfur dioxide have twice been measured at unsafe levels so far.

The fire reportedly erupted as vehicles were being loaded onto the ship. However, the exact cause of the fire has not yet been determined.

According to Michael Giunta, president of the Newark Firefighters Union, who spoke with CBS News, he believed that the firefighters who first

responded were not trained in procedures to deal with this sort of fire. This was corroborated by Newark Mayor Ras Baraka. Given that the Port of New York and New Jersey is one of the major such facilities in the country, the lack of provisions to cope with such inevitable events represents criminal negligence by the capitalist ruling class and their political representatives in the Democratic and Republican parties.

New Jersey's Democratic governor, Phil Murphy, issued a perfunctory statement, declaring, "This tragedy is a painful reminder of the dangers our firefighters face and their remarkable courage." This is cold comfort to the family, friends and colleagues who gathered on Friday to commemorate the dead.

The lack of readily available necessary equipment and properly trained emergency personnel, under conditions in which lives are directly in peril and environmental damage is predictable, exemplifies the ruling class' prioritization of profit over every other consideration.

With the train derailment earlier this year in East Palestine, Ohio, and so many similar incidents, the ruling class will work to cover up the long-term consequences of this fire. They cannot be relied upon to take meaningful measures to eliminate such dangerous conditions in the future.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact