

Workers evacuated from future Toyota electric battery production mega-site in North Carolina after being overcome by fumes

Jane Wise

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Workers were evacuated from a building on the future site of the Toyota Battery Manufacturing, North Carolina (TBMNC) in Liberty, North Carolina on Thanksgiving morning when they were overcome by fumes in one of two completed buildings at the site. The complex will have a total of 15 buildings when completed.

According to *Que Pasa Media*, a Spanish-language newspaper from North Carolina and the only media outlet to report on the incident, up to 2,000 contractors were at work in the building whose ventilation system was not yet operational.

Initially reported as a gas leak, it was later found that fumes from an epoxy being used to seal the cement floors in the building caused workers to become ill. A worker told *Que Pasa* that at least three people were hospitalized from the effects of the fumes, while a Toyota representative denied any workers were sent to the hospital.

Que Pasa reported that workers were given the choice to return to work in the building, although there was no one on site qualified to reopen the building.

Workers on the job site related a far more chilling account of events to the *World Socialist Web Site*. Speaking to the WSWS, an employee of one of the subcontractors reported that the incident on Thanksgiving actually began the night before during the second shift on November 22. According to the employee, the building was evacuated at 11 p.m. after contractors began getting sick due to a strong odor in the building. The fire department was called, and though the source of the smell was not identified, workers were sent home several hours later.

When contractors reported to work the next morning at 6:30 a.m., only a few hours after second shift workers were sent home, they were not informed of the incident on the previous evening. After about two hours, workers began reporting dizziness, headaches, chest pains and difficulty breathing. Some workers began vomiting. The building was evacuated a second time at 8:45 a.m.

Eyewitnesses reported that one worker was vomiting uncontrollably and unable to stand. The worker was taken off the site in an ambulance.

Initially, the general contractor, Kajima Building and Design Group (KBDG), announced that workers could return to work in the building later in the afternoon of November 30 but then instructed all workers to go home. The WSWS was told that Toyota officials at the site were upset that workers were sent home until it was discovered that the order had come from someone higher up in the Toyota organization.

The building was to have been ventilated for two days following the evacuations over Thanksgiving. However, workers were evacuated for a third time on Saturday, December 2, due to carbon dioxide buildup from the machines being operated in the building. WSWS learned that safety personnel on site warned KBDG that there were too many construction machines being operated in the confined space. The warning was ignored and workers were kept on the job until they began getting sick, at which point they were evacuated and the building was ventilated.

Nearly two weeks after the incident, a supervisor and a worker who were on the second shift crew on Thanksgiving eve, when the building was evacuated for the first time, have both reported developing pneumonia. The safety director of the subcontractor who hired the workers reported that the pneumonia may have been induced by the workers' prolonged exposure to the floor sealant. Workers affected by the fumes are attempting to have their absences from work and doctor visits covered by workers' comp, but Toyota has not responded to the workers' requests.

Toyota Battery Manufacturing, North Carolina (TBMNC) is located in central North Carolina, about 30-minutes southeast of Greensboro. Toyota announced plans for its first and only battery plant in the United States in 2021. At the end of October 2023, Toyota announced a further investment of \$8 billion in the facility in response to the market shift to electric vehicles (EVs).

As reported by the WSWS, sales of EVs nearly quadrupled from 3 million worldwide in 2020 to over 10 million in 2022. The International Energy Agency predicts global sales will more than triple, to over 35 million, by 2030.

Incidents like those over Thanksgiving are not uncommon on

the Liberty, North Carolina worksite, which is plagued by safety violations and exploitative labor practices due to the chaotic supervision of the project. Workers must often contend with contradictory safety information from Toyota, KBDG, the subcontractor that hires them, and the temp agencies that recruit them.

The employee on the site told the WSWs that the sealant used on the cement floors that sickened workers was one of 87 unapproved chemicals at use on the site. According to the Safety Data Sheet (SDS) provided by the manufacturer of the sealant, respirators must be worn when using the product. Workers from the subcontractor hired to apply the epoxy were observed only wearing disposable N-95 masks. The contractors who were later evacuated from the building who were employed by a different subcontractor were not instructed to wear any personal protective equipment against the fumes.

Among the slew of hazards workers face on the Liberty, North Carolina job site, the handling of dangerous chemicals stands out. When asked how 87 unapproved chemicals can be at use on the site, the employee said that while the general contractor may have approved the use of the chemicals, Toyota has not yet approved them, though the request has been pending for a year.

Workers and safety managers have raised concerns over the presence on site of electrolytes, a highly dangerous solvent used in the manufacturing of lithium ion batteries, while the plant is still under construction and is not scheduled to go online until 2025. According to the SDS for electrolytes, a single exposure to the substance can cause damage to the central nervous system. Other hazards include reproductive toxicity, inhalation toxicity and organ damage.

Barrels of electrolytes are being stored on the worksite with little more than a swag of red caution tape between the deadly chemicals and the contractors working around them. Workers who handle the chemical wear hazmat suits. The construction crews working in the building do not wear them and sometimes find themselves working shoulder to shoulder with workers in hazmat suits.

The employee told the WSWs that the containers are moved frequently because of ongoing construction and that spills are commonplace. According to the employee on site, workers once reported a spill from one of the barrels containing electrolytes. An employee of the general contractor responded, "I don't work in that building." Nothing was done about the spill.

Workers' concerns about safety on the job site are often ignored or result in immediate termination by Toyota, the general contractor, or their subcontractor. Electricians on the site report that Toyota implemented its own version of a lockout/tagout (LOTO) system used to protect workers from electrocution. OSHA's LOTO system is the industry standard and is the system almost universally used by electricians on construction sites.

Contractors received little or no instruction on Toyota's LOTO system, and when asked by the electricians' safety director for documentation of their system, Toyota refused to provide it. Toyota's insistence on the use of their system has created chaos in the LOTO zone. The familiar padlocks and labels used on breakers are now a confusion of variations of Toyota's and OSHA's systems. Electricians who are found to have made a mistake are immediately dismissed.

Contractors' hours are not monitored, aggravating already dangerous conditions on a construction site with heavy machinery and highly toxic chemicals. Workers are already working 10-hour days with only a 45-minute break for lunch. According to the employee on the site, it is not unusual for workers to clock 85 hours per week for weeks on end. The employee told the WSWs that one contractor worked 300 hours in a month.

It is the unwritten rule of the subcontractors that workers are expected to work overtime. Workers who will not work overtime are more likely to be terminated.

The subcontractor employee told the WSWs that conditions on the site are so hazardous that two safety directors have recently resigned. Often, when the safety directors raised concerns with representatives of KBDG and Toyota about the conditions on the worksite, the discussions were contentious and numerous threats were made against their jobs.

Workers at the TBMNC site have spontaneously organized against the harsh conditions in which they must work. When a supervisor refused to bus a work crew to the parking lot a few minutes early, the workers walked to the parking lot, blocking construction vehicles as they did. Some workers have petitioned for amenities like microwaves to heat their food.

Spontaneous actions by workers against their bosses alone will not yield long-term changes in their working conditions and may lead to victimizations. Contractors of all trades at the TBMNC site must band together to form a rank-and-file committee to organize a united counteroffensive against the dangerous and inhumane working conditions enabled by their subcontractors, KBDG and Toyota.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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