

# Worker suffers life threatening burns at Meridian Magnesium plant in Eaton Rapids, Michigan

## Fire at Port Houston in Texas kills 2, injures 1

Kevin Reed  
14 January 2024

An auto parts worker was badly burned and airlifted to the University of Michigan hospital in Ann Arbor after an explosion and fire at the Meridian Magnesium Products factory in Eaton Rapids on the night of January 4.

Mark Gillespie, 56, was reported by his brother to be in stable condition, but “not doing well,” after he was burned on 50 percent of his head and body in the incident. Les Gillespie told the *Lansing State Journal* that his younger brother was given a 50 percent chance of survival by medical professionals.

The elder Gillespie, who lives in Atlanta, said his brother worked at the plant for more than 10 years. After spending three days at Mark’s bedside, Les said his brother was not responsive and did not open his eyes or move his fingers and toes. While his breathing was improving, Les said Mark was still on supplemental oxygen.

The elder Gillespie added that he has been unable to get any details about the explosion and fire in which his brother was injured.

As of this writing, Meridian—a global manufacturer of die cast automotive parts with 1,600 employees worldwide based in Strathroy, Ontario—has not issued a statement on the cause of the accident or expressed concern about the condition of Gillespie. The *Journal* contacted Meridian seeking an official comment, but as of Wednesday had not received a response.

The *Journal* reported on January 10, “officials were mum about the incident on Thursday and Friday,” but quoted an email it received from Eaton Rapids Mayor

Pam Colestock, who said three people were injured in a “small explosion,” including one who sustained burns and two who were treated at Eaton Rapids Medical Center and released.

Colestock also expressed more concern for the property of Meridian than the life of a worker, writing, “To my knowledge, there was no damage to the plant. The fire was extinguished very quickly by the Eaton Rapids fire department.”

Eaton Rapids Fire Chief Roger McNutt told the *Journal* that an employee was burned in the fire and taken to Sparrow Hospital in Lansing, which apparently occurred before Gillespie was airlifted to Ann Arbor.

The *Journal* also reported, “A spokesman for the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration said an investigation of the Jan. 4 incident at Meridian Magnesium is underway. Those types of investigations can take months to complete, he said.”

In 2018, two Meridian workers were injured in a fire and explosion that burned a significant portion of the factory and forced the shutdown of production. One of the injured workers was blown through the doors of the plant by the explosion when he reentered the facility to help with evacuation.

With one third of Meridian’s instrument panel components going to Ford, pressure was applied to reopen the plant quickly to resume parts production for F-150 and F-Series Super Duty pickup trucks. The Ford factories in Dearborn, Michigan and Kansas City had been shut down due to a shortage of these components.

While magnesium is a light structural metal needed

for fuel efficient auto design, the die cast manufacturing process places the molten material under high pressure. It is highly volatile if it comes into contact with water.

Workers have reported that fires are common in the Meridian factory and the company has been cited 18 times by OSHA for safety violations, the majority of which are labeled “Serious.” However, in the OSHA citations associated with the fire in 2018, which the company contested, Meridian was fined just \$7,000.

### **Fire at Port Houston kills two, injures one**

The fire and explosion at Meridian Magnesium Products was followed elsewhere in the United States by a deadly fire aboard a container ship in Port Houston on Monday which killed two workers and injured a third. The local fire department responded to a report of a fire on board the M/V Stride, that was docked at the port’s Barbours Cut Container Terminal.

Yahoo News reported that the fire started in the engine room at 3:30 a.m. and was extinguished one hour later. The Baytown Fire Department reported, “[Firefighters] arrived on scene and were directed to the vessel’s engine room to perform rescue operations. During the search, Baytown firefighters located the unaccounted crew members. Regrettably, two of them were found to be deceased, while the third was alive.”

The report also said the US Coast Guard and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) are investigating the incident and the ship, a 27-year-old container ship sailing under the flag of Panama, is still docked at Port Houston.

These accidents are a continuation in 2024 of ongoing injuries and deaths of workers across the US. Although the figures for 2023 are not yet available, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported on December 19 that fatal workplace injuries in the US increased by 5.7 percent in 2022, with 5,486 workers killed during the year.

The National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries also shows that the number of deaths per 100,000 workers increased from 3.6 in 2021 to 3.7 fatalities in 2022. The BLS report states, “A worker died every 96

minutes from a work-related injury in 2022 compared to 101 minutes in 2021.”

The BLS summary also states, “Transportation incidents remained the most frequent type of fatal event accounting for 37.7 percent of all occupational fatalities. There were 2,066 fatal injuries from transportation incidents in 2022, a 4.2 percent increase from 1,982 in 2021.”



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**