

Workers and residents outraged as scale of industrial fire in Detroit suburb comes into view

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A series of massive industrial explosions at a smoking and vaping industry supply warehouse rocked the Detroit suburb of Clinton Township, Michigan, on Monday night. A fire at the facility triggered chemical explosions and sent projectiles into the night sky that traveled for hundreds of yards. Nineteen-year-old Turner Lee Salter, who was reportedly observing the fire a quarter-mile distant from the warehouse, was hit by one of the projectiles and killed. The young man was struck on the head by a burning gas canister.

A firefighter from the first response team sent to the site, Matt Myers, was also injured when he was clipped on the side of his face by glass debris resulting from another flying gas canister smashing into his vehicle's windshield at high speed. Local Fire Chief Tim Duncan said the firefighter was treated at a hospital and released with minor injuries.

Clinton Township is a densely populated, largely working class area situated some seven miles from Detroit's city borders. Its population is just over 100,000, and its population density is roughly 3,500 residents per square mile, higher than that of the city of Detroit. The neighborhood where the blast took place is home to mostly low-income residents of a diverse background, including many immigrants.

The facility that exploded belongs to a company called Goo and an affiliated company, Select Distributors Wholesale. Goo bills itself as a smoke shop that sells tobacco and smoking paraphernalia. Select Distributors provides marijuana-related equipment and merchandise to the local cannabis industry. One local resident said that the largely destroyed building "used to be about the size of a Costco facility."

Hank and Patty, residents of a nearby community, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the explosion could be

felt at their daughter's house some five miles from the blast site. "You could see the night sky turn sort of orange," Patty said. Hank related, "We heard a noise, and we thought that it might've been a truck collision on the freeway or something. But then we felt a rocking, like from a blast, so we couldn't figure it out. Then we turned on the news and saw the live footage of the fire a little later. We were horrified."

A local resident, describing the massive fire and round after round of explosions, told the WSWs, "We didn't know if it was bombs going off, a war, or what."

Joleen Vultaggio told the *Detroit News* that she heard the explosions at her home in Sterling Heights, which is eight miles from the site of the disaster. "It just freaked me out because it wasn't like one boom. It was continuous and very intense," she said.

Jeffrey Korby, who lives near the blast, told local television station WXYZ that "There was nothing but fireballs" throughout the night.

Firefighters and police officers who arrived at the scene were "under fire" from shrapnel careening from the building. Police Captain Anthony Coppola said there were "exploding canisters raining down all around us and subjecting multiple staff members to potential peril."

Clinton Township officials said on Tuesday that butane and nitrous oxide, lighter fluid, vape pens and canisters measuring 12-18 inches and weighing 10-15 pounds exploded during the blaze. Employees at an industrial facility next door estimated that 3,000 to 4,000 heavy canisters at the warehouse exploded. Fire Chief Tim Duncan told news crews that a truckload of butane canisters had arrived at the building over the previous week, and more than half of that stock was still on-site when the fire began. More than 100,000 vape pens were also stored at the facility.

Speaking to the reporting team from the WSWs, the workers warned that some of the bulky canisters were “live” and could still explode if exposed to flames. Sharp debris from the explosions had damaged the neighboring facility’s central power fuse box.

Socialist Equality Party vice presidential candidate Jerry White visited the blast site on Wednesday. Pointing to a “dead” canister from a nearby Walgreens parking lot, he observed that “these things are like artillery shells.”

White placed the criminal negligence and profiteering that led to the Clinton Township disaster within the broader context of a social and political system, capitalism, that is entirely beholden to the corporate-financial elite, which wages class war at home and imperialist war internationally.

The debris field stretched for hundreds of feet beyond the building. Fire Chief Duncan said the combination retail tobacco store and cannabis warehouse had items with blades and knives, and such things were “flying through the air also” in the early morning hours of Tuesday. Residents have been notified via Facebook to look for debris from the explosions on their roofs, where it could potentially cause more damage to homes.

Paul Brouwer, the township’s emergency management coordinator, said that social workers had been deployed to many neighborhoods to pick up debris from sidewalks, front yards and streets. Twenty-five gas canisters were found in residential yards during the day on Tuesday. Countless smaller and lighter canisters with the Goo company logo plastered across the front were scattered across Clinton Township following the explosion.

The deadly blaze ignited at night, when there were no workers on-site or in any of the adjacent businesses. The toll in human life from the disaster could have been far worse. The blast site sits near the corner of two busy multi-lane streets, directly behind a Walgreen’s pharmacy and a Burger King, and across the street from a tool & die shop, a plastics manufacturing building, and a Wendy’s. Howard C. Richards Middle School is located just over a mile away.

As of this writing, the fire was still live in parts of the building due to an ongoing chemical reaction. Firefighters were putting out flames more than 36 hours after the explosion.

The local police department is conducting an investigation into the circumstances behind the explosion. Police Chief Dina Caringi stressed that it was not a criminal investigation, although township officials have stated that the company was illegally storing hazardous

materials in a back room.

Township Supervisor Bob Cannon said on Tuesday that the two companies had applied for permits in 2022 for the site “to do something that we thought they were going to do, which was legal,” but they “ended up doing something that is clearly not only illegal but immoral and dangerous.” The permits issued to Goo and Select Distributors Wholesale were for retail commercial use of the shared property. The area where the businesses are located is not zoned for industrial warehousing.

Cannon remarked that had township officials known that containers of butane and nitrous oxide were being stored at the facility, “We would have issued violations immediately and worked to get them out of there.” He then added, evidently to justify the township’s failure to enforce zoning and safety rules on the owners of the operation, “We can’t just walk into somebody’s back room.”

According to the township’s fire marshal, the last inspection of the business’s back room, where the explosive canisters were being stored, took place in May 2022. Contrary to the township supervisor’s claims, the delivery and storage of these dangerous canisters were apparently known to casual observers visiting and working in the area.

The two business owners were reportedly taken to police headquarters on Monday night and interviewed by the fire prevention division, as well as agents from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (BATFE). Regarding the investigation, Cannon said, “There are going to be repercussions. People have done things wrong. Very wrong. We don’t like it, and we’re not gonna accept it.”

However, no charges have been filed against the company owners as of this writing.



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