

# Australia: Second major fire in nine months at Melbourne chemical factory

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A massive factory fire broke out last Wednesday at chemical manufacturer Australian Contract Blenders (ACB), in the western Melbourne suburb of Derrimut, following an explosion.

The blast set off Victoria's largest industrial fire in years, with more than 180 firefighters needed to subdue the blaze. While the fire was brought under control after around four hours, teams from Fire Rescue Victoria and the Country Fire Authority, as well as aviation firefighters worked for more than 20 hours to extinguish it. A smaller crew remained on site for several days to watch over the smouldering wreckage.

No-one was physically hurt or injured during the explosion, though some firefighters have required medical attention. Fire Rescue Victoria has implemented special health protocols to monitor firefighters for any ill effects from their chemical exposure, after some involved in fighting a major industrial fire in 2018 suffered long-term illnesses.

Michelle Cowling from Fire Rescue Victoria, speaking to the *Age*, explained the challenges confronted by firefighters at the site, and the danger posed to workers and local residents.

"The warehouse itself is full with multiple types of chemicals," she said. "And those drums are being impinged by fire, so they are exploding and, therefore, they launch into the air and land outside of the fire perimeter."

Neighbouring factories were evacuated and residents of surrounding suburbs were advised to remain inside, with doors and windows closed and heating systems off. A toxic plume of black smoke was visible across the city.

The ACB group specialise in blending and manufacturing chemicals and dangerous goods, including fuel, methylated spirits, ethanol, paint, and

automotive chemicals for both retail and industrial consumption.

Chemical fires are notoriously difficult to extinguish in the best of circumstances, and this one required more than three million litres of water and 40,000 litres of firefighting foam. This posed the issue of a buildup of toxic water and slurry, which emergency responders could not work near or around.

According to the *Age*, firefighting efforts were delayed by a disagreement between the emergency responders, Melbourne Water and the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) over how and where to dump the contaminated run-off. Melbourne Water, the government-owned water authority, has previously been saddled with multi-million dollar bills to clean up waterways polluted by chemical firefighting operations.

Notwithstanding this hesitation, water used to fight the fire drained into Cherry Creek, Anderson's Swamp and Kayes Drain, and residents have been warned to avoid local waterways.

The direct cause of Wednesday's explosion is still under investigation, as is a major fire at the same factory nine months ago, in which 44-year-old worker Reece Martin was killed and two others were injured.

Martin's father, Mick, told the *Age*, "I believe that company was a time-bomb just waiting to go up. It cost a lovely man his life."

Representatives of WorkSafe, the Victorian government "safety regulator," have visited the ACB factory 24 times since the October explosion and issued seven compliance notices. The EPA has also conducted nine inspections of the site.

The fact that this has done nothing to prevent another incident at the same facility points to the standard practice of these official "safety" regulators: In one case after another, "investigations" into workplace

fatalities and injuries have resulted in, at most, a slap on the wrist for employers.

Asked about the repeated incidents at ACB, Victorian Labor Premier Jacinta Allan told the *Age* she could “appreciate those questions being raised,” but declined to comment about ongoing investigations.

Allan insisted that the same agencies that have been “investigating” the site since October would be responsible for looking into last week’s fire. “We have, in recent years, strengthened the powers, particularly of the EPA... and this will be thoroughly investigated by those agencies,” Allan said.

But these “strengthened investigation and inquiry powers,” and “prevention-focused regime” were enacted in July 2021 and did nothing to prevent another disaster from unfolding under the noses of EPA investigators.

Last week’s incident follows a string of toxic factory fires in Melbourne over recent years.

In December, a 57-year-old worker was killed and two others seriously injured in a paint factory fire in Dandenong South. The fire spread to an adjoining factory and a truck parked out front was incinerated in the explosive blaze. A WorkSafe investigation is ongoing.

In a striking parallel with the repeated fires at ACB, a recycling plant in Coolaroo was the site of four major fires in 18 months between February 2017 and July 2018, despite dozens of EPA inspections and six legally enforceable notices. The third of these fires, in July 2017, forced a 24-hour evacuation of the surrounding area and continued to smoulder for 11 days, spewing toxic pollution into the air.

In 2020, a review of the Dangerous Goods Act 1985 and associated regulations was commissioned by the Victorian Labor government, then led by Daniel Andrews, with the final report published in 2022.

The review was prompted by two major related chemical fires, which highlighted widespread violations of regulations around the storage and disposal of hazardous material.

The first was a 2018 West Footscray fire that took 140 firefighters to subdue, with their ability to reach the centre of the fire hampered by walls of shipping containers and 44-gallon drums stacked up within the warehouse. While purportedly a timber recycling facility, the site had in fact been used for the illegal

storage of vast quantities of flammable chemicals.

Then in April 2019, a fire erupted at a site owned by waste management company Bradbury Industrial Services. A worker was hospitalised with burns to his face and throat. Just three weeks earlier, EPA inspectors had found the facility was storing almost three times as much chemical waste as was legally allowed.

WorkSafe subsequently inspected other industrial properties within the area, and reportedly found 14 other illegal stockpiles of chemical waste with links to the West Footscray and Campbellfield sites.

The report made 49 recommendations, of which the Labor government stated “support in full” to only 22, and noted that even these would be subject to “further stakeholder engagement.” In other words, only those reforms deemed acceptable to corporate interests will be implemented.

Last week’s fire underscores that workplace safety and the environment cannot be left in the hands of agencies like WorkSafe and the EPA, whose purpose is to cover over the real cause of dangerous working conditions and pollution—the subordination of workplace safety, and broader environmental concerns, to the profit interests of big business.



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