

Six factory workers dead or missing in Eastern Tennessee after being kept on the job during Helene's deluge

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As flood waters in North Carolina and Tennessee continue to recede, search and rescue efforts are underway in earnest to locate the hundreds still missing after Hurricane Helene dumped more than two feet of rain on the mountain region.

The number of confirmed dead stands at 160 across six states, but this number is expected to rise as rescue crews begin to reach areas cut off by fallen trees, damaged roads and bridges.

A grim picture is beginning to emerge of the estimated 600 people still missing after the storm.

The affected areas in eastern Tennessee are reporting nine deaths so far and 180 people missing. Among the fatalities and missing are six workers from Impact Plastics in Erwin who attempted to escape the swiftly rising water of the Nolichucky River.

Impact Plastics made employees come in to work on Friday morning despite the imminent threat of flooding from Helene. Supervisors told the workers they were monitoring the situation.

According to family members, employees were told to remain at work even as water was rising around their feet and their parking lot became impassable. Eleven employees attempted to escape in the back of a semi-truck driven by a worker from a neighboring business. The truck was overcome by flood waters sending all 11 workers into the rushing waters.

Six workers were swept away. Two are confirmed dead with four others still missing. At least four of the missing are immigrants from Mexico. Local news reported one worker found refuge on top of a van long enough to call home and say good-bye to her children.

Robert Jarvis, who was working at Impact Plastics on Friday, spoke with News 5 WCYB and confirmed that

workers were told they could not leave despite the swiftly rising water from the river.

Jarvis said the power went out suddenly and he received a text from a co-worker that the parking lot was flooding. When he asked a supervisor what he should do, he was told he could move his car to higher ground, but “it was still underwater, there was no dry ground in the parking lot,” he said.

Upon returning to the building Jarvis asked if the workers could leave. The supervisor told him they could not leave until she spoke to “Gerry.” She was referring to the Impact Plastics founder and CEO Gerald O’Connor. Ten minutes later the woman told the workers they were free to go.

“When they told us we could leave it was just too late. There was no way out.” Jarvis related his efforts to exit the parking lot, which was a single road out to the main road. Traffic was backed up as employees fled the property.

When he heard someone had cut a hole in the fence to escape to I-26, Jarvis turned his car around, but it was immediately swept away by the rising water. He was saved when a vehicle equipped with four-wheel-drive was able to reach him and others who were overtaken by the water.

“We lost six people and that was all on first shift,” Jarvis said, speaking of the workers who were swept away when the semi-truck was washed away.

Jacob Ingram was among the workers who sought refuge on the semi-truck trailer. He recounted to local news that he and 10 other employees were fighting their way across the parking lot in waist deep water when the driver of the truck helped them onto the back of the trailer.

They waited for two to three hours, calling 911 and being told help was on the way. “[I]t was because the hospital was about to collapse, and I understand that, but they shouldn’t have told us someone was on the way.” Ingram was referring to nearby Unicoi hospital where 50 people were trapped on the roof.

Ingram captured video of the flood waters as he waited for the help that wouldn’t arrive. It shows cars floating through the parking lot and large rolls of flexible yellow pipe bobbing in the rushing water.

A large piece of debris jolted the truck, knocking the first woman into the water where she vanished. A second piece of debris flipped the truck completely, sending the rest of the workers into the rapids.

Ingram survived by clinging onto a roll of yellow plastic pipes. “I wedged my hands into it, and it took everything I had to hang on,” he said. Ingram and four other employees came to rest on a pile of debris about half a mile from the plant where they waited an hour before being airlifted by a helicopter from the Tennessee National Guard.

Bertha Mendoza and Johnny Peterson are two workers who are known to have died in the ordeal. Monican Hernandez and Sibrina Barnett are among the missing. The names of the remaining two missing workers have not been made available.

Impact Plastics’ CEO O’Conner released a statement on Monday in which he clumsily tried to deny any liability for his missing or dead employees: “When water began to cover the parking lot and the adjacent service road, and the plant lost power, employees were dismissed by management to return to their homes in time for them to escape the industrial park. … While most employees left immediately, some remained on or near the premises for unknown reasons.”

In other words, employees were kept on the job until it was too late for those without four-wheel-drive vehicles to leave.

Reports posted on social media say O’Conner was spotted at Impact Plastics on Saturday, September 28 checking on his Porsche inside the factory. His indifference to the plight of his employees was darkly portended in a 2014 *Business Journal* article on O’Conner, in which he led with a quote from the Book of Proverbs 29:18: “Where there is no vision, people perish...”

Despite meteorologists’ unequivocal warnings about

the strength of Hurricane Helene, Tennessee’s Republican Governor Bill Lee did not declare a state of emergency ahead of the storm as did officials in North Carolina, September 25, Georgia, September 25, and Florida, September 23.

On September 27, when Impact Plastics employees were fighting to stay alive on the back of a semi-flatbed truck, the governor was signing a proclamation making the day a “voluntary Day of Prayer & Fasting across the Volunteer State.”

Lee finally declared an emergency late in the afternoon on Saturday long after the worst of the catastrophe in Tennessee had begun.

The tragedy at Impact Plastics is reminiscent of the six workers who died at an Amazon warehouse in Edwardsville, Illinois and nine at a candle factory in Mayfield, Kentucky after they were not allowed to leave during an outbreak of tornadoes in 2021.

The capitalist class places their own interests above their workers who they see as a means to an end, profit, and easily replaceable. The tragedy at Impact Plastics is yet another confirmation that the working class must abolish capitalism and the barbarism it manifests and reorder society based on the interests of humanity.



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