

# Esparto fireworks explosion: As families grieve, new evidence exposes a system of corporate crime and state collusion

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The seventh and final victim of the catastrophic July 1 fireworks facility explosion in Esparto, California has been identified: Christopher Bocog, known in the community as the rapper “Oopz.” His family confirmed the news this week, speaking with local media about the devastation of losing him in such horrific, preventable circumstances.

Bocog had worked for Devastating Pyrotechnics for several years, and helped organize events like Union Square’s Chinese New Year fireworks display—an event he cherished. His sister Catherine told reporters she is haunted by the fact that there is no body or ashes to bury. “I’m his older sister and his best friend. I’m really, really angry, and I don’t know who to place that anger towards,” she said.

That anger must be directed not just at one individual, or even one company, but at the entire economic and political system that enabled this disaster. This is not merely a workplace accident; it is a social crime, the result of a capitalist order that prioritizes private profit over human life, tears down safety regulations, and allows an oligarchy of criminals in suits and uniforms to operate with impunity.

Christopher Bocog joins six other victims whose lives were cruelly stolen in the explosion:

- Jesus Maneces Ramos, 18, a recent high school graduate expecting his first child;
- Jhony Ramos, 22 or 23, his older brother;
- Joel “Junior” Melendez, 28, their stepbrother;
- Carlos Javier Rodriguez, 41, a close family friend;
- Neil Li, the company’s general manager;
- Angel Voller, a young worker also fresh out of high school.

The fire and blast incinerated workers so completely that only rapid DNA testing could begin to identify the

remains. Families have been left without closure, without justice and without any indication that those responsible will face consequences.

Most of the dead came from working-class immigrant families—families, which are doubly vulnerable. On the one hand, they face the daily risks of exploitative labor, without job security, benefits or safety. On the other, they live under the constant threat of ICE raids, deportation and police harassment. This dual terror creates the conditions in which immigrant workers are most easily used and discarded like refuse.

New revelations about the company behind the Esparto disaster have only added to the outrage. Kenneth Chee, the CEO of Devastating Pyrotechnics, had long been banned by the federal government from possessing explosives due to a felony conviction related to firearms. And yet, despite this, Chee was able to operate one of the largest fireworks businesses in the Western United States—with the blessing of California regulators.

Chee’s ATF application was denied, but a federal explosives license was instead issued to another man, Gary Chan Jr., effectively serving as a legal front for Chee’s operations. California officials not only approved the company’s activities but allowed it to store and handle high-powered explosives with minimal oversight. In 2023, the company even touted its record in public proposals, claiming to employ full-time staff and dozens of licensed pyrotechnicians, with apprentices gaining “experience” by working side-by-side with professionals.

As events in Esparto show, that “experience” often meant being thrust—untrained and unprotected—into conditions of extreme danger.

On July 8, law enforcement officers executed a search warrant at a residence in San Francisco linked to Devastating Pyrotechnics. The Inner Richmond home,

listed as the company's official business address, was raided by officers from multiple counties, bomb squads and investigators from the State Fire Marshal's office. This followed multiple search warrants already executed, though no arrests have yet been made, and authorities have not yet named any suspects or disclosed findings.

The warehouse that exploded was not even legally permitted for fireworks storage. The land was zoned for agricultural use, not high-explosive handling. Yet, Devastating Pyrotechnics operated openly, with the knowledge—or complicity—of local officials.

Among those entangled in the network of impunity is Sam Machado, the Yolo County sheriff's lieutenant who owns the property, and Craig Cutright, a volunteer firefighter who not only worked for Devastating Pyrotechnics but also owned another company, BlackStar Fireworks, listed at the same address.

This is what regulatory capture looks like in real life. The very agencies meant to oversee safety and legality were either financially entangled or politically dependent on the same individuals running illegal operations.

What happened in Esparto is not unique either. It is merely one of the most egregious expressions of a national epidemic. The United States has one of the highest workplace fatality rates in the developed world—3.5 deaths per 100,000 workers, over three times the rate of countries like the Netherlands, Germany, the UK, or Sweden. Even non-fatal injuries, at 2.4 per 100 workers, far outpace those of comparable countries.

This disparity is the result of decades of aggressive deregulation, gutted enforcement, and a sustained assault on the very idea of public accountability. While European countries, faced with their own capitalist contradictions and massive increases in war spending, have begun to roll back some protections, they still maintain comparatively stronger workplace safety standards and more rigorous inspections.

In the United States, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is understaffed and underfunded, especially after the Trump administration repeatedly targeted OSHA with significant funding (8 percent) and staffing (12 percent) cuts, reduced enforcement and an aggressive deregulatory agenda. In the meantime, employers face barely more than a slap on the wrist for maiming or killing workers.

The betrayal of the trade unions has deepened this crisis. Once organized to fight for the rights and safety of workers, today unions operate as junior partners of management, enforcing sellout contracts and suppressing

real opposition.

That is why the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has launched an independent investigation into the death of autoworker Ronald Adams Sr., a unionized worker who died in an industrial incident despite supposed “protections.” Union membership did not save him—just as it would not have saved the seven who died in Esparto.

The outpouring of grief and solidarity in Esparto and surrounding communities has been enormous. Candlelight vigils, mutual aid, and support for the victims' families reflect the immense human compassion and resilience that exists within the working class. But compassion alone will not prevent the next tragedy.

The only path forward is a political one: the independent organization of workers through rank-and-file committees—democratically controlled by workers themselves and totally free from the corporate-dominated union leaderships. These committees must fight for workers' control of safety and production, and link up across industries and borders, uniting workers in construction, agriculture, logistics, entertainment, and all sectors where labor is exploited and life is cheapened.

The conditions that led to this disaster were not simply the product of individual negligence. They were created by capitalism itself—a system in which everything, including human life, is subordinated to the profit motive. The lives lost in Esparto, like those of countless others, are casualties in a war being waged by the ruling class against the working population.

Workers must say: enough is enough. The guilty must be named, the truth exposed, and the entire structure of exploitation dismantled. The road to safety and dignity lies not through appeals to the existing authorities, but through revolutionary change. The working class must take power into its own hands and reconstruct society based on human need, not corporate profit.

*Support the rank-and-file investigation of Ronald Adams' death and the unsafe conditions across industries by filling out the form below. All identities will be kept confidential.*



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