

Gas exposure at Colorado dairy farm kills 6

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Six farm workers died in an accident at a dairy farm in Keenesburg, Colorado about 40 miles northeast of Denver. Fire crews responded at 6 p.m. local time Thursday to a “confined space rescue” at a site owned by Prospect Valley Dairy LLC. The site is comprised of a 32,500 square foot milking parlor and several barns spanning over half-a-million square feet. Authorities reportedly responded to reports of unaccounted for people within a confined space at the facility.

This is the latest in a string of industrial disasters in the United States. On August 11, an explosion at the Clairton Coke Works near Pittsburgh killed two steelworkers and injured 10; on Monday, a barge exploded in Baltimore near the Francis Scott Key bridge, which itself had collapsed in a separate incident last year. There also have been high profile deaths in the auto industry, including skilled tradesman Ronald Adams, who was crushed to death in April. A rank-and-file inquiry into Adams’ death has been launched, and a public hearing held on July 27.

In Colorado, “Crews responded and took appropriate precautions to enter the confined space to perform rescue operations,” said Southeast Weld Fire District Chief Tom Beach in a statement on Thursday. “Unfortunately, District personnel recovered six deceased individuals from the space.”

Limited details of the incident are available to the public as of this writing, but preliminary reports suggest that the six victims were exposed to hazardous gas. Initial reports from the coroner’s office indicated that all six dead were adult men except for one victim who may have been just 17 years old.

A source later gave more details to the website Daily Herd Management, which said the following:

... the disaster began when a contractor was working on an underground manure pit at

Prospect Valley Dairy. Throughout the day, workers frequented the area, and as the day concluded, a worker returned to perform additional tasks, potentially involving adjusting a valve. This action inadvertently led to the release of hydrogen sulfide, a toxic gas known for its lethality at high concentrations.

Tragically, the worker inside the pit collapsed almost instantly due to the hazardous exposure. In a desperate attempt to rescue him, five others rushed into the pit, disregarding a supervisor’s warnings not to enter the dangerous space.

Among the victims was a 17-year-old high school student from Highland High School in Ault, the son of one of the workers involved in the incident. Dairy Herd Management is told that two farm employees, along with two service representatives were among the deceased, along with two sons of one of the service representatives.

A Gofundme has been set up to help the families of the workers with funeral expenses and other items.

Gas hazards can pose a serious risk to worker safety on dairy farms. Common threats on dairy farms include the build-up of hydrogen sulfide and ammonia from manure, and carbon monoxide from equipment and machines. These gases can pose a significant threat to the lives of farm workers, especially in poorly ventilated enclosed spaces. Carbon monoxide is odorless, and while hydrogen sulfide smells of rotten eggs, it is known to quickly dull the sense of smell, weakening the ability of workers to detect its presence.

On large industrial dairy farms, manure is often stored beneath the barn floor where hydrogen sulfide can build up and be released when the manure is agitated. Even in outdoor manure pits hydrogen sulfide

can quickly build up under the right conditions. According to Daniel Andersen, Associate Professor of Manure Management and Water Quality at Iowa State University, 150 people have died in the United States from manure-related gas incidents since the 1960s.

To deal with these deadly gases, many facilities use complex ventilation systems and digital monitors to control the build-up of gas. While confirmation of cause of death is still pending investigation, initial reports suggest that the deaths may have resulted from exposure to hydrogen sulfide, which is the most common gas safety risk on dairy farms.

Farm laborers work in one of the most dangerous industries in the United States. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics occupations categorized as agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing are the fourth highest group for workplace fatalities at 448 per 100,000 workers and an injury rate of 4,200 per 100,000 in 2023. Dairy farms specifically saw a total of 21 deaths and a rate of 3,100 injuries per 100,000 in 2023.

A concerning statistic among these figures is the prevalence of older workers among the fatalities in agriculture and farm work. In 2023, 57 percent of agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing deaths were among workers aged 55 and over, with 65 and older making up 37 percent alone, the largest group by a large margin.

This is due to a predominance of older workers in the agricultural industry, with the average age of farm laborers over 58 years old, an ongoing trend of aging among agricultural workers.

High injury rates are also found among young farm workers, with hundreds of thousands of people under the age of 20 living on farms.

An estimated half of these young people work on the farms they live on and at least 4,000 young people are injured working on farms annually overall. Injury and death figures are certainly an undercount due to the distributed nature of the industry, lack of safety oversight and the large population of immigrant workers in agriculture.

Significantly, immigrant workers launched a strike last week at another dairy facility in Wisconsin. The workers demanded the company stop using E-Verify to confirm immigration status. The federal system, notoriously error-prone, is used to quickly purge

workers, leading to family separations and depriving them of income.

Disasters such as the Colorado gas exposure will become more common as the result of the dismantling of remaining regulations on US corporations. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, already woefully underfunded and with limited enforcement power, is being gutted by the Trump administration. In 2022, OSHA already had so few inspectors that it would have taken it 186 years to inspect every American workplace. Now, Trump is cutting the budget by 8 percent and eliminating 200 more inspectors.

The attack on immigrants is an attack on the whole working class. In addition to using immigration as a scapegoat to divert anger away from capitalist inequality, the rampage against immigrants is the tip of the spear for Trump's dictatorship plans. On Thursday, Trump issued a new executive order directing immigration authorities to trawl through the personal information and social media posts of 55 million visa holders, in order to find excuses to deport them.

The terror against immigrants is also aimed at intimidating workers into silence, out of fear that reporting or fighting back against dangerous conditions would only put a target on their back for immigration authorities.

But outrage against both Trump's bid for dictatorship and impossible working conditions is driving growing opposition in the working class. It is this force, armed with a socialist and internationalist perspective, which can and must be brought to bear against capitalist inequality and police terror.



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