

3 Texas workers killed by toxic gas at sewer plant

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29 August 2025

If you have information on what led to the deaths at Trinity, Texas, contact the WSWS by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. Your anonymity will be respected.

Three workers were killed Wednesday after being exposed to toxic hydrogen sulfide gas at the Westwood Shores sewer plant near Trinity, Texas. Hydrogen sulfide, produced by the decay of organic matter, is a well-known hazard in sewers, sewage treatment facilities, food processing plants, ranches and landfills, as well as in certain industrial processes.

Two of the victims—John Nelson Sr., 52, of Cleveland, and Bradley Wrightsman, 46, of Katy—were employed by H2O Innovation, a Canada-based multinational specializing in wastewater utility maintenance and management. The third, Brad Hutton, 47, worked for Hydroclear Services, which operates sewage vacuum trucks. All three men, residents of the Houston area, were in the prime of their working lives.

Both companies were working under contract for the plant, which is operated by the Westwood Shores Municipal Utility District.

According to the Trinity County sheriff, the men were initially working above ground, fixing a motor at a lift station in the sewage facility. Lift stations are used to pump sewage or wastewater from lower to higher elevations.

When sewage began backing up in the area, one of the men descended into a nearby manhole to try to fix the problem but did not return. The other two attempted a heroic rescue, and all three were apparently overcome by the lethal hydrogen sulfide gas. Their bodies were later recovered by Montgomery County Emergency Service District (ESD) 1 and sent for autopsy. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has been notified of the incident.

H2O Innovation President and CEO Frédéric Dugré issued a perfunctory statement characterizing the incident as a “tragic work accident” and said the company was “working to determine what led to the deaths, working closely with the Trinity County Sheriff’s Office and other local officials.” He added that the company would release “more information when it’s available and as permitted by the families and law enforcement.”

Hydrogen sulfide poisoning, however, is a well-documented workplace hazard. One of the most basic safety measures in sewer work is the use of fan systems to ventilate confined spaces and evacuate toxic gases. It is not known whether such equipment was in use at Westwood Shores. Additional safeguards include personal and remote monitors to detect hydrogen sulfide and other dangerous gases, such as methane, which is also explosive.

Reports indicate that at least one of the workers who went in to save his co-worker had a gas meter alarm that was sounding, but it seems that not all the men were equipped with such devices.

“It is our understanding that the crew that was doing this work was not supposed to be doing any underground or not equipped or outfitted for that type of work,” Deputy Chief Jeremy Carroll of the Trinity County Sheriff’s office stated.

Working in confined spaces is also a well-known industrial hazard. OSHA regulations require that when such spaces contain, or could contain, hazardous atmospheres, a permit system must be in place. This includes periodic air monitoring, strict control of entry, and an emergency plan for foreseeable dangers, such as hydrogen sulfide exposure. It is not known whether any such permit system was in effect at Westwood Shores.

None of these questions has been addressed in the

statements issued by either company or by local officials.

A similar tragedy occurred recently at a Colorado farm, where six workers were killed by hydrogen sulfide exposure in an underground manure pit. Their deaths were among the thousands that occur every year in the agricultural sector, where workplace safety is systematically neglected so that “cost savings” can be converted into profit.

More than 5,200 workers are killed on the job each year in the United States, according to official figures. The real toll, including deaths from occupational diseases, is over 140,000 annually. At Clairton Coke Works, for example, two workers were killed and 10 seriously injured in what workers have said was a foreseeable disaster, the result of deliberate neglect by both management and the union of urgently needed repairs at the plant.

The rank-and-file investigation into the death of Ronald Adams Sr., an autoworker crushed by a gantry crane at Stellantis’ Dundee Engine Plant in southeast Michigan, provides an important lesson for stopping such deaths. Whatever has been exposed about Adams’ entirely preventable death—or about the disaster at Clairton Coke Works—was uncovered through the initiative of rank-and-file workers, not the companies, unions or government agencies.

We call on all workers and anyone with knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the deaths at the Westwood Shores sewer plant to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* by filling out the form below.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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