Accurate Energetic Systems workers raised safety concerns before fatal Tennessee explosion

Jerry White
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Workers at the Accurate Energetic Systems (AES) raised serious safety concerns before the massive explosion at the Tennessee munitions factory that killed 16 workers, in one of the worst industrial disasters in the US in decades. The blast obliterated Building 602 on the eight-building facility, leaving no survivors.

The remains of 14 of the 16 victims have now been identified through DNA comparisons with relatives.

LaTeisha Mays, 26, worked at AES for eight months before she was killed in the explosion. Family and friends said she expressed concern for her safety and for others at the factory, which supplies TNT and explosive devices to the US military and commercial customers.

According to CNN:

> LaTeisha Mays had raised several safety concerns about her job previously, her family said, and had complained about getting nose bleeds at work, but she was waiting to pay off her car before taking another job. Echoing the family, Mays' roommate told CNN she had expressed concerns about her job and dreaded every shift inside the building.
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> Her father Ernest Mays raised concerns about the safety precautions at the site, particularly after an earlier blast in 2014. In April that year, an explosion at the facility killed one worker and injured four others, CNN affiliate WSMV reported.

The authorities, including Tennessee Republican governor Bill Lee, have dismissed any connection with the previous explosion, which, they say, occurred at a separate company, American Sporting Supplies, that leased a building on the AES site.

In 2019, Tennessee Occupational Health and Safety Administration inspectors cited AES for "serious" hazards, after several employees suffered seizures for exposure to cyclonite (RDX), an explosive linked to nervous system damage. Residue was found on worktables and even in the break room, yet fines were quietly reduced to $7,200.

Responding to a reporter's question about the previous safety violations, Lee downplayed their significance, saying, "Certainly, the reports from 2019 are clear… We know what that was about, and I think that was resolved in the same year. There were actions taken and reports made. So that's what happens when there is a workplace incident: they are reported, they are inspected, citations are made or not made, there is a full reporting and accountability. So that occurred, five years ago, and I'm not aware of any other incidences from that point forward."

In fact, just a year after, on October 30, 2020, there was a near-miss of a catastrophic explosion in the very same Melt-Pour building that exploded last Friday. According to an investigative report by the *Daily Mail* in the UK, maintenance supervisor Greg McRee was forced to put out a fire using only a garden hose to douse the flames shooting from an industrial chimney.

Had the flames spread to the boiler or ignited the stacks of canisters—high-energy primers used to set off bigger explosives in mining or demolition—"It would have leveled the building. Same thing that happened to the building the other day," McRee told the *Daily Mail.* But instead of being rewarded, he was dismissed days later from his $28-an-hour supervisor job for "violating" company prohibitions against "fighting explosive fires."

The article continues:

> McRee disputed the findings, however, and insisted he was made a scapegoat. 'The evaporator itself never caught fire. Someone had built a building out of wood that should not have been a wood structure,' he said.

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> ‘They demolished the entire evaporator building in about three days, so I don’t know how well it was investigated. They self-investigate a lot down there.’

A co-worker named Jimmy Sugg came to the defense of McRee, and a second maintenance worker, James Creech, 78, was also fired after the near disaster. In a statement provided to Creech’s lawyer, Sugg said:

“If a true investigation had been performed, it would had been discovered that the exhaust stack was run out of the plywood decked roof during the installation and the exhaust stack temperature ran around 900 degrees which should have been the contributing factor for this building catching on fire… Why wouldn’t this have been looked into and questioned? Why wasn’t the one that installed the evaporator disciplined? Why did the Safety Manager not do the investigation on this incident?”

Other workers have also come forward since the fatal explosion. Jayd Begin worked at AES for three months and was inside Building 602 a few hours earlier. She told CBS-affiliate WSMV4, “I very well could have been in that building,” Begin said. “It could have been my family that was getting that call; fortunately, I was spared.”

Asked if she wanted to go back to her job, she replied, “It’s a good company, but is it worth me risking my life, you know, I got kids, family. So, I’m probably not going to go back. This is catastrophic, you know, by the looks of the buildings. What’s left? There’s nothing. It’s hard to believe, 16 people lost their lives and these families have nothing to grieve with.”

Earlier this week, authorities released the names of the 16 victims. They were: Jason Adams, 52; Erick Anderson, 44; Billy Baker, 59; Adam Boatman, 21; Christopher Clark, 60; Mindy Clifton, 51; James Cook, 56; Reyna Gillahan, 50; LaTeisha Mays, 26; Jeremy Moore, 37; Melinda Rainey, 57; Melissa Stanford, 52; Trenton Stewart, 25; Rachel Woodall, 28; Steven Wright, 53; and Donald Yowell, 58.

These workers were sacrificed for corporate profit and war. Governor Lee has overseen billions in tax giveaways and other financial incentives to corporations, and in 2023 signed the largest tax cut in state history. In February 2020, the state handed AES a $601,000 FastTrack Economic Development grant, tied to 80 jobs and $9.7 million in capital investment at its project site in McEwen, Tennessee.

According to indeed.com, hourly wages range from $18.25 per hour for a material handler to $24.98 per hour for a truck driver. For many, these are considered good wages in the area, where the median household income is a dismal $35,786 a year.

In recent years, AES has received hundreds of millions of dollars in orders from Department of Defense, including $120 million for “the procurement of TNT” on September 23, 2025, less than three weeks before the explosion. In March 2024, the Army awarded AES the opportunity to compete for each order of the $55 million contract for Trinitrotoluene and Plastic-Bonded Explosive N-9 supplementary charges. In 2023, it was awarded an $86 million contract from the Navy for demolition charges to be completed by May 2028; and in 2022, the Army awarded AES an $11.5 million contract for M18A1 and M68 mines.

A recent article in the *New York Times* noted that hundreds of defense technology companies are “drawn by local talent, cheap labor and state cash incentives to revive manufacturing in once-vibrant industrial cities across the Midwest and Northeast.” Trump has pushed for more domestic manufacturing, while levying steep tariffs on imported goods and barring the US military from buying products like drones from foreign adversaries such as China, the article notes. It adds that “state lawmakers and local representatives are eager to attract defense tech firms to create jobs.”

“America is waking up to the fact that our national security depends on making more stuff in America,” said Senator Jon Husted, Republican of Ohio, adding that places like his state “have a competency in making things.”

The catastrophe in Tennessee has exposed a fundamental truth: The same capitalist system that sends workers to die on the battlefield also sacrifices them in the factories that feed the war machine. This will only worsen as Trump eliminates whatever is left of federal safety regulations and ramps up war production, while using the military to crush internal opposition.

“We have a lot of questions and not a lot of answers,” LaTeisha Mays’ sister Kelli Avonte said.

Justice for these Tennessee AES workers is only possible if an independent investigation, led by rank-and-file workers, is conducted to expose the truth and hold accountable all those responsible for this crime.

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