Wall Street Journal article on Tennessee munitions plant explosion exposes an industry that “polices itself”

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A newly published *Wall Street Journal* article offers a revealing but ultimately limited glimpse into the conditions that produced the October 10 explosion at the Accurate Energetic Systems (AES) munitions factory in Bucksnort, Tennessee, which killed 16 workers in one of the most devastating industrial disasters in recent American history.

Spread across more than 1,300 isolated wooded acres 60 miles west of Nashville, the company manufactures a wide range of explosive compounds, boosters, demolition charges, and specialized munitions components used by the US Department of Defense and commercial industries.

Building 602 is where the explosion occurred. It manufactured commercial “boosters,” soup-can sized charges used to ignite the larger explosive charges required in mining and other industrial operations. These boosters are produced through a process known as melt casting, in which TNT is heated to a molten state and mixed with more sensitive compounds to increase its shock energy. The molten explosive is then poured into metal or plastic casings and set aside to cool and harden before shipment.

Workers who do this job cannot wear clothing that might produce static electricity. Cellphones and personal electronics are turned off or left outside of the building. The tools they use are made of wood or materials that will not produce sparks. The floors inside of the building are routinely dampened to prevent a static charge. The so-called FISH rule (friction, impact, shock, and heat), is a reminder to workers of the four conditions that can instantly detonate the explosive mixtures they work with.

The US explosives industry is nominally one of the most heavily regulated sectors in the country, yet no agency actually exercised oversight over the conditions inside Building 602, according to the *Journal* article. Four governmental bodies had formal responsibility for monitoring operations at Accurate Energetic Systems, each with its own mandate and inspection schedule.

Pentagon explosive-safety inspectors visited the AES property four times per year, but their authority reportedly extended only to buildings involved in fulfilling military contracts. Because Building 602 produced commercial boosters for mining and industrial blasting, DoD inspectors did not visit the building, the *Journal* reported.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) is responsible for regulating commercial explosive manufacturers, yet its jurisdiction is narrowly limited to storage, security, and record-keeping. The agency does not review workplace conditions, manufacturing processes, chemical handling or worker safety. During its 2024 inspection of AES, the ATF recorded no violations but it did not examine Building 602 at all.

The Tennessee Occupational Safety and Health Administration (TOSHA), charged with protecting workers from industrial hazards, had inspected AES only once in 20 years. That lone inspection resulted in a paltry $7,200 fine for chemical exposure that caused employees to suffer seizures. TOSHA conducted no follow-ups, no periodic monitoring and no hazard-specific inspections of the melt-cast operations inside Building 602, despite the known dangers associated with heating TNT and mixing sensitive energetic compounds.

The Institute of Makers of Explosives (IME), the industry’s trade association, promotes “voluntary best practices” and insists that commercial explosive production is “highly regulated.” But the IME has no enforcement authority, and its primary function is to defend the profitability of explosives manufacturers, not to guarantee safety.

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Despite this array of agencies and inspection regimens, Building 602 fell under none of their purviews. Its processes, equipment, and working conditions went uninspected year after year. This was not an accidental blind spot but the direct consequence of a regulatory framework deliberately structured to keep production flowing for both military and commercial clients.

"This is an industry that polices itself," explosives safety expert Bob Morhard told the *Journal*. Commercial munitions producers are expected to follow an extensive array of regulations and safety practices. However, Morhard pointed out, there is no system in place to ensure they do.

ATF special agent in charge, Brice McCracken, told the *Journal* the initial explosion is believed to have occurred in the area where the melt kettles heated the TNT mixture. It then triggered a chain reaction, igniting an estimated 28,000 pounds of explosives stored inside the building, a force exceeding the explosive yield of the US military's largest conventional bomb, the mother-of-all-bombs (MOAB).

The force of the detonation was so immense that it was felt up to 15 miles away, and debris was scattered across an area spanning more than 500 acres as recovery teams searched for remains.

Investigators indicated they will be examining the chemical components used in the melt-cast process and whether the temperature controls and heating procedures inside the building were adequate.

Although federal authorities have not yet issued a definitive explanation for what triggered the initial ignition, at least one family has already filed a wrongful-death lawsuit, asserting that the plant's conditions and procedures placed workers in severe, foreseeable danger.

Republican Governor Bill Lee—a recipient of campaign contributions from former AES President John Sonday and his wife, current owner Kimberly Sonday—has rushed to the defense of the company. He denied any link with a previous explosion at the facility in 2014, which killed worker Rodney Edwards, claiming it occurred under a different firm that leased a part of the building from AES. However, AES was contractually responsible for ensuring safety compliance and quietly settled a lawsuit over that case for an undisclosed amount.

The governor and other officials have also not raised the fact that AES management fired several whistleblowers, including maintenance supervisor Greg McRee, who in 2020 used a garden hose to extinguish a fire in the very same melt-pour building that exploded October 10.

The explosion at AES cannot be viewed in isolation. It forms part of a widening pattern of deadly workplace disasters across the United States that exposes the systematic subordination of workers' lives to corporate profit.

In the past week alone, two US postal workers—36-year-old Nick Acker and 44-year-old Russell Scruggs Jr. suffered grisly deaths in separate incidents in mail distribution centers in the Detroit and Atlanta areas respectively. On November 4, a UPS plane carrying 200,000 pounds of jet fuel exploded on take-off, killing three crew members and 11 people on the ground in Louisville, Kentucky.

The escalation in preventable workplace deaths is not accidental. It flows from the basic workings of the capitalist system itself: the drive for profit, the alignment of state policy with corporate and military interests, and the role of the trade union apparatus in suppressing workers' resistance. This process has been accelerated by the Trump administration's gutting of OSHA and the effort to lift all restrictions on the exploitation of the working class.

The necessary response is the development of independent working class resistance. Workers must form democratic, rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace, linked across industries and internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

These committees are the means by which workers can investigate working conditions themselves, halt unsafe operations, challenge corporate and governmental cover-ups and assert the fundamental right to refuse dangerous work. By linking these committees across workplaces, industries and countries, workers can begin to coordinate a unified struggle against the capitalist system that sacrifices their lives for profit.

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