

Federal prosecutors seize on California warehouse fire to criminalize anti-capitalist opposition

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On April 7, shortly after 12:30 a.m., a major fire broke out at a 1.2 million-square-foot Kimberly-Clark distribution warehouse in Ontario, California. The facility, which stored large quantities of paper products, was rapidly consumed by the blaze.

All 20 workers on the night shift were evacuated, with no deaths or injuries reported. Some 175 firefighters from more than a dozen agencies battled the inferno, which took nearly 12 hours to extinguish. The warehouse was destroyed, with losses estimated at \$500 million to \$600 million.

The facility was owned by Kimberly-Clark Corporation, a multinational personal care and hygiene products giant whose brands include Kleenex, Huggies, Scott and Kotex. The company sells its products in more than 170 countries and reported operating profit of \$2.4 billion in 2025, compared to \$2.7 billion the year before.

Later that day, Chamel Abdulkarim, 29, a warehouse worker employed at the facility through a third-party contractor, was arrested. Authorities claim Abdulkarim ignited the fire and filmed himself doing so. A video posted to his personal Instagram account, which appears to show him lighting paper products on fire, quickly went viral on social media.

Authorities have not officially confirmed a motive, but video Abdulkarim filmed and uploaded to social media points strongly to anger over low wages and poor working conditions.

Throughout the video, Abdulkarim can be heard repeatedly tying the act to low wages, declaring, “If you’re not going to pay us enough to f*cking live or afford to live, at least pay us enough not to do this sh*t”; “You know, we may not get paid enough to f*cking live, but these bitches [lighters] dirt cheap”; and “All you had to do was pay us enough to live.”

According to authorities, Abdulkarim also expressed anti-corporate, anti-government and anti-capitalist sentiments in social media posts, texts and phone calls. In one quoted exchange allegedly obtained from his phone, he said, “They had it coming ... f*cking eight hours, six days, [unintelligible] stuck paying rent on a bullsh*t ass apartment that I can’t afford to f*cking live ... pedophiles out here f*cking children, profiting off [unintelligible] f*cking wars.”

Abdulkarim allegedly compared his actions to those of Luigi Mangione, who is accused of killing Brian Thompson, the former CEO of UnitedHealthcare. In other texts and phone calls cited by authorities, Abdulkarim stated: “1% is a f*cking joke”; “Billionaires profiting off of war ...”; and “All you had to do was pay us enough to live. Pay us more of the value WE bring. Not corporate. Didn’t see the shareholders picking up a shift.”

Abdulkarim has pleaded not guilty to the state charges. If convicted in state court, he could face up to 10 years in prison, according to prosecutors. He also faces a federal arson charge carrying a mandatory

minimum sentence of five years and a maximum of 20 years, underscoring the effort to impose an exemplary punishment.

The incident has struck a nerve among workers internationally because Abdulkarim’s statements gave expression, in a politically confused manner, to the intense anger over poverty wages, corporate greed and worsening working conditions.

What has alarmed the ruling class is not the isolated actions of individuals who lash out at their employers and destroy property. Such actions are politically bankrupt, endanger other workers and provide the authorities a pretext to expand state repression. What the capitalist class fears is that the widespread hostility to exploitation and social inequality will find conscious, organized and socialist expression in the working class.

First Assistant US Attorney for the Central District of California Bill Essayli, who has pressed federal charges against Abdulkarim, summed up the fears of the ruling elite, declaring:

“Look, America is founded on free enterprise and capitalism. Anyone who attacks our values, our way of life, our system, which provides the best goods and services to the most people, we’re gonna come after aggressively.”

Essayli’s statement makes explicit that the prosecution is not simply a response to a criminal act, but part of a broader effort to intimidate opposition to capitalism. This is underscored by the leaked 2026 Homeland Threat Assessment from the Department of Homeland Security, which groups “class-based or economic grievances” alongside other supposed motivations for domestic terrorism.

The assessment states:

“In recent years domestic violent extremists have been the most active terrorist attackers and plotters, and we expect this will remain the case in 2026. They are motivated to conduct attacks by a wide range of factors, including anti-government sentiments, racial and ethnic grievances, anti-Israel and anti-Semitic beliefs, and class-based or economic grievances.”

Trump’s National Security Presidential Memorandum 7, or NSPM-7, signed in September 2025, provides the broader framework for this campaign. The memorandum identifies “anti-capitalism” as one of the “common threads” supposedly animating domestic terrorism and political violence. It also cites “the 2024 assassination of a senior healthcare executive,” as an indicator of escalating threats. The memo directs the full force of the federal state, including the FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Forces, the Justice Department, DHS, the Treasury Department and the IRS, toward the investigation and prosecution of such alleged threats.

This stands in stark contrast to the treatment of corporations whose policies and workplace conditions kill and injure workers on a mass scale every year. The ruling class responds to an act of individual property destruction with the threat of decades in prison, while corporate

executives whose profit-driven decisions maim workers, deny healthcare and destroy lives remain untouched.

Recent catastrophic workplace deaths in California alone include:

- The death of Juan Jacobo, a US Foods distribution yard worker who died during active yard operations in January 2026, in Livermore, California.

- The death of Shelma Reyna Guerrero, a UPS worker who was crushed by packages in September 2025 at a UPS hub in Richmond, California.

- The death of Brayan Neftali Otoniel Canu Joj, a 19-year-old worker who was crushed to death in July 2025 while cleaning a meat grinder at the Tina's Burritos frozen-food plant in Vernon, California.

- The deaths of Angel Mathew Voller (18), Jesus Manaces Ramos (18), Jhony Ernesto Ramos (22), Joel Jeremias Melendez (28), Neil Justin Li (41), Carlos Javier Rodriguez-Mora (43) and Christopher Goltiao Bocog (45) at the Esparto fireworks plant explosion in July 2025 in Yolo County, California.

These deaths point to the daily violence of capitalist production. While Abdulkarim and Mangione face the possibility of decades in prison, workplace deaths caused by speedup, unsafe conditions and corporate cost-cutting are overwhelmingly treated as regulatory matters, civil liability issues or "accidents," not as crimes committed by the corporate executives and managers who preside over these conditions.

The fact that social anger is often expressed in desperate and individualistic acts is the product of decades of betrayals by the trade union bureaucracy, which long ago abandoned any serious resistance of capitalist exploitation and has left workers alone to face unprecedented attacks on their jobs, living standards, working conditions and democratic rights.

Workers are not lacking anger or a will to fight. What they confront is a union apparatus that systematically isolates struggles, wears workers down and enforces sellout agreements on behalf of the corporations.

This has been demonstrated in recent months in the betrayal of the strike by meatpackers at JBS in Greeley, Colorado, where UFCW Local 7 ordered workers back on the job despite the company making no new offer; in New York City, where 32BJ SEIU officials abruptly called off a strike by 34,000 doormen, porters and maintenance workers without any vote by the membership; and in Los Angeles, where the union apparatus, working with Mayor Karen Bass and the Democratic Party, canceled a strike by 77,000 educators and school workers only hours before it was set to begin.

These betrayals create the conditions in which social anger, blocked from finding collective and organized expression, can take confused and individual forms. The task is not to romanticize or justify such actions, but to build a conscious leadership in the working class capable of transforming anger over exploitation into a collective struggle against the capitalist system.

That a warehouse worker could resort to such extreme and politically misguided measures will come as no surprise to workers familiar with the brutal conditions in warehouses and logistics facilities. Warehouses are better described as industrial slaughterhouses, where speedup, injuries, safety violations and labor grievances are endemic.

The recent death of an Amazon worker in Troutdale, Oregon, where coworkers were forced to continue working around his dead body, is a testament of the cruel conditions that corporate management imposes on warehouse workers around the world.

The Kimberly-Clark distribution warehouse that burned in Ontario, California, is part of this broader industrial regime. Kimberly-Clark Corporation employs roughly 40,000 workers globally and remains one of the largest companies in the tissue and hygiene market, competing with firms such as Procter & Gamble and Unilever.

OSHA records show multiple serious injuries at Kimberly-Clark facilities across the US between 2003 and 2020, including fractures,

crushed hands and bodies, and amputations of fingers and hands. These injuries point to the dangers posed by unguarded machinery, faulty equipment and relentless production demands.

The most recently recorded incident took place on December 2, 2020, when a worker attempted to clear a jammed pulp sheet from a machine. According to OSHA, the worker's glove was caught by the machine, pulling his left hand into it and causing the amputation of two fingers. OSHA initially cited Kimberly-Clark \$27,306 for the incident, but the penalty was later reduced to \$13,653.

Safety violations at Kimberly-Clark typically range between \$6,000-\$23,000 per violation which are usually reduced or removed entirely at the conclusion of an investigation.

Abdulkarim was not directly employed by Kimberly-Clark. He worked for NFI Industries, a third-party logistics contractor that operated the warehouse on Kimberly-Clark's behalf.

NFI Industries pays warehouse workers in Southern California an average of about \$18 an hour, according to Indeed salary data cited in media reports. That amounts to roughly \$37,000 a year before taxes in Ontario, where the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment is around \$2,000 a month.

NFI has a record of wage and labor violations. In 2025, the company agreed to a \$5.75 million settlement in a nearly decade-long class action lawsuit brought by drivers who alleged they had been misclassified as independent contractors.

The company's subsidiary, California Cartage, was also ordered to pay more than \$3.5 million to 1,416 workers after a 2018 Department of Labor investigation found that the company had failed to pay required prevailing wages and health and welfare benefits.

This record shows the contempt of the ruling class for the safety and well-being of the working class. But this can be only be fought through the collective struggle of the working class, not individual acts of desperation.

Southern California, where this incident took place, is a crucial chokepoint for world commerce. A strike by warehouse workers, in alliance with port workers, truck drivers and rail workers, would shut down vast sections of the US economy. This enormous social power must be consciously organized through rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-corporate union bureaucracies and both big-business parties.

Isolated acts against capitalist property, moreover, do not solve the underlying problem, which is the capitalist system itself. The means of production must not be destroyed by individual workers driven to the breaking point but taken out of the hands of the capitalist class and placed under the democratic control of the working class, to be run for human need, not private profit.

The fight for decent wages, generous benefits, healthcare, paid time off, safe working conditions and secure employment must be waged as a political struggle of the working class against capitalism and for socialism.



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