

16,000 Orange County, California residents still displaced due to toxic emergency at global defense contractor GKN Aerospace

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As of Monday evening, May 25, roughly 16,000 residents in Orange County, California remained under mandatory evacuation orders, now entering their fifth day, after a storage tank at GKN Aerospace's industrial facility on Western Avenue in Garden Grove began overheating and venting a highly toxic, flammable chemical into the surrounding neighborhood. Authorities announced that the faulty chemical tank still poses a threat and are keeping roughly 35 percent of the original evacuation zone in effect.

Originally the evacuation orders affected 50,000 residents in six cities: Garden Grove, Anaheim, Cypress, Stanton, Buena Park and Westminster.

First responders identified the leaking substance as methyl methacrylate (MMA), a colorless, volatile liquid used in the production of acrylic plastics and resins.

MMA is both highly toxic and highly flammable. Exposure causes lung, skin and eye irritation, nausea and dizziness. More dangerously, the chemical reacts exothermically, meaning it generates its own heat. If the temperature inside a sealed container rises beyond a critical threshold, the result can be a BLEVE, a Boiling Liquid Expanding Vapor Explosion, capable of hurling shrapnel and releasing a toxic fireball across a wide area. The 34,000-gallon tank in question contained approximately 7,000 gallons of MMA. A second tank at the same facility was also found to contain the same chemical.

A class action lawsuit was filed on Sunday by two Garden Grove residents living less than a mile from the facility. The complaint accuses GKN Aerospace of negligence, public and private nuisance, and liability for ultra-hazardous activity. According to NBC Los Angeles, the plaintiffs were "displaced from their residences, forced to incur evacuation-related expenses, deprived of the safe use of their homes, and subjected to fear, anxiety, annoyance, inconvenience, and distress arising from the threat of toxic exposure and catastrophic chemical storage failure." GKN, when contacted, offered only a prepared corporate statement.

Federal disaster assistance has also been a source of frustration for evacuees. FEMA announced it would not cover hotel stays for displaced residents, leaving many, particularly those without savings, the elderly, the disabled and families with pets, to sleep in their vehicles or seek shelter in overcrowded community centers.

The incident lays bare, in the starkest terms, the subordination of working class communities to the profit demands of global military-industrial corporations. GKN Aerospace, headquartered in Birmingham, UK and owned by the investment firm Melrose Industries PLC, is one of the world's largest aerospace and defense suppliers, generating annual revenues of £3.4 billion (\$4.6 billion). It operates in 12 countries with more than 16,000 employees across 30 sites worldwide. In Garden Grove, it sits directly adjacent to residential neighborhoods, a sports complex and schools. It has now emerged that the facility has been cited repeatedly for safety and environmental violations for years.

"They knew that tank was leaking months ago"

Reporters with the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with displaced residents at an evacuation shelter on Monday. Robert, a 62-year-old construction worker, has lived in Stanton for four years. He and his partner Lisa, who is on disability and had previously experienced homelessness, have been living in their truck since the evacuation began. They have no money for food and no access to their apartment, which sits behind police cordons. Their car is also trapped in the evacuation zone, and Robert's nephew has been sending videos of people in masks breaking into vehicles and apartments left unguarded.

"I used to build those tanks back in the '80s," Robert said, his voice rising with anger. "There is no way in hell that

these guys can't tell me that they didn't know that tank was leaking weeks ago, months ago, if not a year ago. It takes time before the steel corrodes and rusts through. They don't just develop a leak overnight. And when I worked at Anaheim Steel, they knew we had chemicals there. They were in there every six months inspecting the place. There is no need for this."

He drew an explicit comparison to the East Palestine, Ohio, train derailment of 2023, in which a Norfolk Southern freight train carrying toxic chemicals derailed and poisoned a working class community. Government officials and the company have minimized the danger and withheld information.

Lisa said, "It's like the pandemic. We weren't notified until the last second. They tell us when it's too late. The government doesn't think about us. I hate this government. They only think about them. You don't see them leaving their houses. You don't see them poor, with no food or no gas."

Robert concluded: "I say we get together and overthrow them and take our country back. Because how many kids of these politicians have we put through college? How many houses do they own on our backs? Their wallets keep getting fatter and ours keep getting slimmer."

Jose, a self-employed renter who has lived for 12 years near the GKN facility, said: "Since we've been living here, we never imagined that this company had such dangerous chemicals. It's surrounded by residents living here for so many years who probably never thought we were breathing contaminants on a daily basis, day and night."

He described the anxiety of not knowing when residents will be allowed to return and the real fear about what return will mean. "Many people won't be feeling secure going back home knowing that company still operates in that same location," he said.

Jose also pointed to the economic devastation facing homeowners in the area. "Who knows about your own property value? There are many years of work going down, their savings and home value, because of that situation." The surrounding community, he noted, is predominantly working class, drawn from Asian, Latino and black families, many of them immigrants.

Luis Jr., a high school basketball coach and Cal State Fullerton engineering student, has been living in a car with his family of six, including a dog, since Friday, unable to access the shelter because of the dog.

"This is our first time getting evacuated," he said. He described the scene inside the evacuation center as organized but strained: families sleeping on rows of cots, food distributed three times a day, and staff handing out underwear and basic necessities to people who fled with

nothing.

He said he had known GKN Aerospace was in the neighborhood because there is a sports facility directly across the street from the tank site. But he had not known what chemicals were being stored there. When told of the company's global scope, including its operations in 12 countries, multi-billion-dollar revenues and prior regulatory settlements, he simply said: "I guess they're a company that goes through these types of situations but doesn't really do anything about them."

Corporate apology, government failure

On Sunday, GKN Aerospace issued a formal apology, expressing "deep regret" for the disruption to residents' lives. The statement pledged cooperation with authorities and committed to "the safe resolution of this incident." It offered no explanation for how the situation was allowed to develop, no acknowledgment of its prior regulatory record and no concrete commitments to affected residents beyond the immediate crisis response.

Absent from the official response has been any serious reckoning with the fundamental question: Why is a multinational defense manufacturer storing thousands of gallons of volatile, explosive chemicals in a 34,000-gallon tank directly adjacent to a densely populated working class neighborhood in one of the most expensive and overcrowded regions of the United States? Why have years of regulatory citations and settlements not produced safe storage conditions? And who, if not the workers, renters, disabled, elderly and children now sleeping in cars and evacuation shelters, bears the cost of corporate cost-cutting?

The answer, as Robert stated, is not a mystery. "It's all done for profit," he said. "There's a sensible, common sense way of solving the issue before it happens. These guys knew that damn tank was leaking, and they don't just develop a leak overnight."



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