

Chemical tank disaster averted in Southern California; owner GKN Aerospace is major military contractor cited for safety violations

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The immediate explosion risk at GKN Aerospace’s facility in Garden Grove, California is over—for now. On the night of May 25, a thermal inspection confirmed that a physical crack had developed in the bulging steel shell of a 34,000-gallon storage tank containing methyl methacrylate (MMA), a volatile, self-heating monomer used to manufacture cockpit canopies for fighter aircraft.

The crack relieved the internal pressure that had been building since May 21, dropping the tank’s temperature to manageable levels. California Governor Gavin Newsom and President Donald Trump have both signed emergency declarations. Roughly 16,000 residents remain under mandatory evacuation orders as of this writing, reduced from a peak of 50,000 across six Orange County cities who fled the threat of a catastrophic vapor explosion over the Memorial Day weekend.

When the cooling system failed on May 21, the drainage valves were found to be clogged with polymerized plastic, a failure mode that occurs specifically because of inadequate maintenance. Workers and emergency crews discovered there were no backup systems, no redundancies, no secondary cooling loops.

The immediate catastrophe may be averted. But the structural catastrophe, the one that made this incident possible, has not been addressed by so much as a single sentence from any government official, at any level, anywhere.

GKN Aerospace is not a conventional manufacturing company. It is one of the world’s foremost Tier 1 suppliers to the global war industry, a “super Tier 1” in the industry’s own terminology—meaning it sits one

step below the Lockheed Martins and Raytheons of the world, fabricating the structural bones and nervous systems of the weapons those primes assemble and sell. Its components fly inside more than 100,000 civil and military aircraft daily.

GKN has sought authorization to export controlled military goods or technologies to at least 64 different nations. Its factories in twelve countries manufacture F-35 fuselage structures and electrical wiring harnesses, MQ-9 Predator drone V-tails, fighter engine compressor rotors, missile canisters, and the stretched acrylic canopies—produced right in Garden Grove.

The near-disaster comes as the Trump administration is calling for an unprecedented 50 percent increase in the annual military budget to \$1.5 trillion. In addition to replenishing missile stocks severely depleted in the war on Iran, this money will be used to massively increase production of weapons systems to prepare for new wars, above all against China.

The incident shows the cost of this buildup is being borne by the working class in more ways than one. Government spending in education, healthcare, public transportation and countless other programs are being gutted to pay for war. Meanwhile, workers who live near these defense plants are exposed to serious safety hazards caused by corporate cost-cutting and speedup.

Garden Grove and Stanton sit in the middle of Orange County’s most underserved census tracts. Little Saigon lies within the evacuation perimeter. These are communities shaped by decades of redlining and industrial zoning that systematically placed heavy chemical operations adjacent to low-income immigrant neighborhoods. When the tank began to rupture, many residents could not access emergency communications

because they were issued only in English. FEMA refused to cover hotel stays. Families slept in their cars.

GKN is owned by Melrose Industries, a London-based investment vehicle whose business model is openly described as “buy, improve, sell,” a euphemism for acquiring industrial assets, stripping out safety and maintenance costs to inflate margins and liquidating the results for shareholder gain.

Melrose’s institutional shareholder base reads like a directory of American and British finance capital: BlackRock, Vanguard, T. Rowe Price, Capital Group, AllianceBernstein.

The Garden Grove facility had accumulated a documented record of regulatory violations going back years: California OSHA citations in 2018 for improper cooling of volatile chemical tanks and failure to inspect active machinery; a \$1 million settlement in 2021 with the South Coast Air Quality Management District for operating toxic equipment without permits; further compliance notices in March 2025 for the same record-keeping failures that triggered the 2021 settlement.

The total penalties across multiple violations amounted to a rounding error against Melrose’s revenues. Its CEO received a £45.4 million bonus—one of the largest executive payouts in the FTSE 100—in 2024.

The Garden Grove plant manufactures the acrylic canopies for the F-16, F-15, F/A-18 and the F-35. GKN’s other facilities manufacture the complete electrical wiring interconnection systems installed in every F-35 ever built.

The Israeli Air Force operates F-15s, F-16s and F-35s. When the Palestinian human rights organization Al-Haq brought a legal challenge in the UK courts to force suspension of F-35 component exports to Israel, the UK government’s lawyers successfully argued that disrupting the F-35 supply chain would damage NATO security and undermine US confidence in British reliability.

Garden Grove is not an isolated case in the defense industry. In October 2025, sixteen workers were killed when between 24,000 and 28,000 pounds of high explosives detonated at the Accurate Energetic Systems munitions plant in Bucksport, Tennessee. The blast exceeded the yield of the US military’s MOAB bomb, the second-largest yield conventional bomb in history. It occurred inside a facility where workers had

repeatedly flagged broken kettles and leaking equipment.

Employees described being told to “keep the line running no matter what.” Federal and state authorities responded with platitudes about community healing and issued no criminal charges.

The Tennessee disaster was one in a continuous series of deadly incidents in America’s industrial slaughterhouse, where corporations are fined next to nothing when dangerous conditions claim workers’ lives. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, always with limited enforcement power, is one of many regulatory agencies being gutted by Trump. OSHA employs only one inspector for roughly every 93,000 workers in America.

The Orange County District Attorney has launched a criminal investigation and regulatory reform proposals are circulating in Sacramento. But there is little reason to believe the outcome will be any more than a slap on the wrist, or perhaps at most a lower level manager or worker made the scapegoat.



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