

Worker killed, dozens of firefighters injured in Staten Island shipyard fire and explosion

Robert Milkowski
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Xiaoyuan Li, a 57-year-old immigrant worker from China, was killed on May 22 when a fire and explosions tore through the May Ship Repair shipyard in Mariners Harbor on the north shore of the New York City borough of Staten Island. More than two dozen New York City Fire Department (FDNY) and Emergency Medical Services personnel were injured, several seriously, when a major secondary explosion occurred while they were conducting search and rescue operations inside the industrial complex. Li was a husband and father who had worked at the yard for approximately four years and lived in Flushing, Queens.

At approximately 3:30 p.m., emergency dispatchers received calls reporting a fire in the rear section of the yard and workers trapped near the dock. The FDNY did not arrive at a stable, contained scene—firefighters entered an active emergency, conducting searches through confined metal structures and tank and basement areas adjacent to the dry dock. At approximately 4:20 p.m., a major secondary explosion rocked the facility while responders were still inside.

May Ship Repair operates as a shipyard and dry dock facility, performing marine repair and construction work involving welding, cutting, fuel systems, coatings, buoyancy and ballast tank systems and labor inside enclosed metal structures. According to reporting by the *New York Times*, a dry dock was under construction at the time of the disaster. The fire began in or near the dock, with the first explosion occurring inside a tank within the wall of the dry dock structure—part of the system used to raise and lower the dock.

The disaster was the product of inherently unsafe conditions: workers laboring inside enclosed metal tanks, in close proximity to flammable vapors, in an environment where ventilation failures become lethal and where pressure to complete construction and maintenance work collides directly with safe operation. Confined

maritime industrial labor—welding inside tanks, maintaining ballast systems, working within the interiors of vessels and dock structures—is among the most hazardous categories of industrial work. When safety procedures are subordinated to production schedules and cost pressures, these environments become killing grounds. That Li and his coworkers were inside such conditions did not represent an aberration: It was a routine working day.

Xiaoyuan Li was employed not directly by May Ship Repair but as a subcontractor. Subcontracting is aimed at reducing direct labor costs and diffusing responsibility and legal accountability for safety compliance across layers of contractual arrangement.

The disaster poses several questions: Who supervised entry into the tanks? Who conducted safety inspections? Who bore final responsibility for confined-space procedures?

These questions have not been answered. Among other things, the subcontracting system is designed to ensure that they cannot easily be answered.

Li had worked at the yard for approximately four years. He immigrated from Yanbian, a Korean Autonomous Prefecture in China that borders North Korea, around 10 years ago for a better life for his family, his 22-year-old son, Jerome Li, told the *New York Post*.

Li would start his day at 4 a.m., often not arriving home until 5 p.m. “He’s working hard and taking care of the family,” Li told the *Post*. “He works so early and it’s hard work at the shipyard. Every day he’s really tired when he gets back home.”

He was finishing his last day of work for May Ship Repair on the dry dock in Mariners Harbor before a planned weekend trip with his wife, Jinhua. “My mom called me and said that my dad’s coworker called the police and said that my dad is trapped inside of the boat,” the son said.

Immigrant workers have long been condemned to the most dangerous type of work—construction, dock work, shipyards, meatpacking, agriculture, logistics and maintenance. The same political establishment that publicly scapegoats immigrants—conducting raids, deploying the threat of deportation as a tool of labor discipline—relies materially on immigrant workers to perform exactly the dangerous industrial work the capitalist economy demands.

The North Shore of Staten Island is not incidental to this disaster. Mariners Harbor, Port Richmond, Howland Hook—these neighborhoods constitute an industrial corridor embedded within working-class communities, housing the shipyards, towing operations, storage facilities and logistics infrastructure that support the commerce of the New York harbor. Hazardous industry is built in proximity to the workers who operate it, who cannot afford to live elsewhere and whose neighborhoods absorb the environmental and safety consequences. In 1973, an explosion at a Staten Island liquefied natural gas facility killed 40 workers, one of the deadliest industrial disasters in the city's history.

In the immediate aftermath of last week's explosion, May Ship Repair's ownership issued routine statements expressing shock, describing safety as a "first priority," and declaring full cooperation with investigators. Official investigations were promptly announced by the FDNY Fire Marshal, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and relevant city and state agencies.

But the announcement of an investigation is not the same as accountability. In the months or years that typically elapse before findings are released, production resumes. Conditions are not suspended pending results. Fines, when they come, are characteristically modest and regularly contested and reduced. Responsibility, spread across ownership, subcontracting and regulatory oversight, becomes difficult to assign and easy to contest.

This pattern can be tracked across recent workplace deaths. At the Bayway Chemical Plant in Linden, New Jersey, a 71-year-old subcontractor died after falling into an industrial vat in January 2026. Investigations were announced; months later, neither the worker's name nor his employer's had been publicly released.

At the Stellantis Dundee Engine Complex in Michigan, 63-year-old machine repairman Ronald Adams Sr. was crushed during maintenance in April 2025 when an overhead gantry activated without warning. The United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy remained silent, the

state OSHA agency commenced an inquiry and production resumed uninterrupted. An independent inquiry by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) confirmed that safety procedures that would have physically prevented his death had been routinely bypassed under management pressure with the sanctioning of the UAW bureaucracy.

The death of Xiaoyuan Li is not isolated. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports 5,283 workplace deaths from injury in 2023 alone, with 135,000 additional workers dying annually from occupational illness.

These deaths are routinely framed as isolated tragedies or procedural failures. But they share a common structure: hazardous conditions normalized by production pressure, subcontracting that fragments accountability, aging infrastructure maintained under profit imperatives and a regulatory regime that is chronically underfunded and subject to deliberate political dismantlement. Under the Trump administration, OSHA faces an 8 percent budget cut, a loss of more than 12 percent of its staff and a reduction in inspections that will mean each American workplace is reached by a safety inspector once every 266 years on average. The new head of the agency previously served as a safety executive at Amazon and UPS.

What is required is not another investigation whose findings will arrive months from now in a form that changes nothing. Workers in shipyards, on docks, in warehouses and refineries must take control of safety conditions themselves, through rank-and-file committees that operate independently of management, subcontracting hierarchies and a union bureaucracy that long ago ceased to function as an instrument of workers' defense. The death of Xiaoyuan Li was not an accident. It was an outcome produced by a social system that treats the lives of workers as an acceptable cost of doing business.



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