

# “I’m just a number to them”: Garden Grove residents demand closure of GKN plant after toxic emergency

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On Tuesday evening, California officials lifted the remaining mandatory evacuation orders for some 16,000 residents in Garden Grove, California, who live near an overheated chemical tank at a GKN Aerospace facility. Evacuation orders for some 50,000 residents were initially issued last Thursday, rescinded later that same evening, and then reissued Friday morning.

A 34,000-gallon storage tank at the facility containing methyl methacrylate (MMA), a volatile and flammable chemical, was found to be leaking. The chemical is not only dangerous when inhaled, but also posed the risk of causing a massive toxic explosion.

While the evacuation orders were lifted Tuesday night, police and emergency personnel are maintaining a several-block closure around the facility as chemicals continue to leak from the ruptured tank.

In addition to thousands of residences, several schools are also located close to the facility.

Before the orders were lifted, reporters with the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with residents displaced for several days. Robert, his fiancée Doreen and their family, which includes a baby and young toddler, were forced to evacuate their home and have been sequestered to their van. Robert told the WSWS: “We live in the evacuation zone. We were like a mile away, like right up the street, and then we just got displaced. And we’re trying to figure it out.

“We had a little money saved up to get a room first, but then it ran out, so we’re in the van.”

Robert added that he appreciated Red Cross for providing meals and “letting us sleep in the parking lot.” He added, however, that “it’s not good enough because we’ve got two kids with us, two babies. Six months and almost 18 months.”

Robert continued, “It’s bad because there’s no answers. You know, nobody’s telling us anything. First, it’s about to blow up. Now, they got it contained and there is nothing wrong, there’s nothing in the air. If there was nothing in the air, like I wouldn’t feel sick. We heard they’ve, they had

problems in the past with their company. So nobody’s going to take responsibility for what happened. You operate any new equipment, you have to have permits for it. I know, I used to work for an oil refinery.”

Doreen added “It’s unreal what we are going through.... And I know they changed the evacuation area, but they’re saying that even if you live across the street or one side of the street, that you’re fine. But they also said that they don’t know for sure what the results are, or testing, or effects long-term and short-term. So how can they say if you are across the street you’re okay, but if you’re on the other side of the street, you’re not. How do they really know that?”

“It’s hard to believe that they said that the air is fine or that you’re going to be okay. They don’t know what’s going to happen in 10, 20 years from this and how it’s going to affect our bodies, or even my son because he is so little, or my fiancée who has health conditions already. But they won’t know until it’s already in us and it’s too late.”

Doreen explained that they “rent an apartment” and that the landlord “is still expecting the rent on the first, so we’ll have to figure that out.” She added that monthly rent is \$2,190 and that money earmarked for rent was instead paying for gas and food, “because we’re not able to access our fridge at home.”

The family has set up a GoFundMe to help pay for the unexpected expenses forced upon them by the evacuation.

Stefan is a Vietnamese worker who is currently unemployed. He previously worked in semiconductors. “I’ve lived here for more than 10 years, and I never thought such a thing would happen.”

Asked about the conditions inside the shelter, he said, “For me, it’s okay. Of course, it’s not as comfortable as being at home, but it’s okay.

“I am a citizen of the United States right now, but compared to what I experienced over 10 years ago when I left Vietnam to come here, the conditions here are okay.”

In an attempt to contain mass social anger, Rep Derek Tran, a Democrat whose district includes Orange County, told CNN's Jake Tapper on Wednesday that he was "on the phone" with the Peter Dilnot, CEO of GKN Aerospace's parent company, Melrose Industries, and that he assured him the company will be "accountable for their actions."

Tran then admitted that he was providing public relations advice for the company in order to burnish its now-destroyed reputation in the eyes of millions of workers, not only in Orange County, but around the world. Tran said that he asked Dilnot to "come out and address the public, 'cause he needs to rebuild... that GKN trust with my community members."

For many residents, "accountability" means the closure of the facility, which has a history of safety violations and whose products are almost exclusively used by US imperialism and its allies for conquest and plunder. At a Garden Grove City Council meeting held Tuesday evening, outraged residents demanded the closure of the GKN plant. "This disaster was totally preventable," one man told the council, to the applause of residents in the room.

He continued, "How many Garden Grove residents were aware there was a bomb sitting in their backyards with enough explosive potential to rival the MOAB [GBU-43/B Mother of All Bombs]? How many Garden Grove residents were aware that GKN facility that houses that bomb has incurred \$5 million in compensation for negligence? How many Garden Grove residents were aware that GKN makes components for F-35 fighter jets, the same ones that drop bombs all over Palestine and the rest of the Middle East for the past several years?"

Evangelina and her daughter, a student at Cypress College, spoke to WSWS reporters at the evacuation center at John F. Kennedy High School in La Palma. She works at a medical equipment store and is originally from the Philippines. She asked not to be photographed.

"When we evacuated, we first went to Cypress Civic Center, then Westminster, and then finally to Kennedy High School. It was late. There were buses transporting mostly elderly people. They were tired by the time they reached Kennedy High School. You know, they're homeless. They're tired, hungry.

"Then my daughter and I volunteered to help in whatever we way we could. The Red Cross people let us volunteer.

"Then I decided, because I have a medical condition, we decided to sleep in our car, and we gave up our cot beds. There was a need because there were a lot of people there. I heard about 150 evacuees. There were elderly, families, children and disabled. All kinds of people. The evacuees were very nice. They are very nice people and orderly. They're just getting what they need. They're not hoarding.

"That's why I was very upset Sunday night, when I requested a blanket. The people from that shift told me they weren't giving out any more because people were hoarding. Why hoarding? Because it was cold in the gym.

"I know there was a trailer full of blankets. Why don't they give them away? They should always say 'yes.' I discussed it with some of the Red Cross people, most of whom are nice and working voluntarily."

The authorities announced that some of the people would be allowed to return to their homes. Evangelina said, "Yes, we were one of those. My daughter is back in the house right now."

When asked what the conditions were like, she said, "It's gas! It's gas. We can't see it, but we can smell it. We don't know if it's in the water or in the soil. We really don't know. We are about one mile away from the factory.

"It is scary. When I was preparing for the evacuation on Friday, I have asthma and I have to have my medications. I know that my asthma was attacking me. My eyes are irritated. I'm having a hard time.

"And I see a lot of lawyers in the neighborhood offering their services because we are located right in the area. There's a lot of them because of what's happening. I don't want to go with lawyers who are only there for the money. They weren't there when we needed them."

"GKN paid almost \$1 million in a fine in 2021. But that's not much for a multi-billion dollar company. They're producing hazardous materials. This is real time happening to us. It's producing things for war and defense at our expense. This is capitalism!

"They should be providing me and all these people with new homes, with clean air. I'm just a number to them."



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