

Second death confirmed in Longview paper mill disaster, as officials say there is “no hope” for 9 missing workers

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A second worker has been confirmed dead in the disaster at the Nippon Dynawave Packaging mill in Longview, Washington, where officials said there was no hope of finding survivors among the nine workers still unaccounted for inside the plant. Recovery operations began Wednesday, one day after a 900,000-gallon chemical tank ruptured at the kraft pulp and paper facility.

The Longview Fire Department said Wednesday that one of the workers transported from the scene after Tuesday’s rupture later died of his injuries. Seven other employees and one firefighter were also injured. The nine workers still inside the wrecked facility are now presumed dead, though authorities have not formally added them to the death toll.

The first identified victim was Gilbert Bernal, 52, an instrument technician who had worked at the mill for more than a decade. His daughter, Geovana Bernal, told Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB) that her father “always talked so highly of trade school” and had worked full-time at a gas station to pay for night school while raising two children. Family friend Todd Cornwell, also speaking to OPB, said the family now faces immediate financial hardship: “They’re not going to have any income. They still got bills to pay. Food costs, electricity, rent.”

Families have also publicly named Jared Ammons and Dillon Miller among those killed in the disaster. A GoFundMe for Ammons’ wife and children states that he “passed away in the Nippon accident” and left behind “a wife, two kids and one on the way.” A Meal Train page has also been created for Ana Soto and her three children following “the heartbreaking loss of Dillon Miller.” Authorities have not yet officially released the names of the dead, saying the Cowlitz County Coroner’s Office will do so after victims are recovered and families notified.

The Nippon Dynawave facility has a long, documented history of safety and environmental violations. The Washington State Department of Labor and Industries (L&I) cited the company four times for safety violations between

2019 and 2025 and has two open investigations, including one opened in March after an anonymous complaint about a valve on another corrosive chemical tank. Cumulative L&I fines totaled \$3,400.

The *Seattle Times* found that over the past five years the company had been the subject of at least 19 Clean Air and Clean Water Act violations and five formal EPA citations, drawing fines of \$16,000, of which only \$10,000 had been paid. An August 2025 fire destroyed a Patriot Rail locomotive repair warehouse on the same property. In 2017, between 4,000 and 5,000 gallons of sulfuric acid spilled at the plant.

It is also still not clear what caused the actual rupture, which is still under investigation by L&I and could take up to six months. The agency also confirmed it has two unrelated open inspections at the plant. The first opened in March after an anonymous complaint about a valve on a tank holding aqua ammonia, another corrosive chemical. The second opened in May after a complaint about a sinkhole created by a failed drain. Neither investigation involved the tank that ruptured.

Responsibility for such paltry fines and inadequate enforcement falls squarely on the Democratic Party. Washington state has been under Democratic political control for years; Bob Ferguson, the current governor, served 12 years as state attorney general before his election last year; Senator Patty Murray has held office since 1993; and Cowlitz County is represented in Congress by Democrat Marie Gluesenkamp Perez.

Less than 36 hours after the disaster, with workers’ bodies still inside the wreckage, Gluesenkamp Perez’s public reaction was to defend Nippon’s continued operation. She told reporters the federal investigation should not be allowed to become “the last straw for a viable mill.” She continued, posing as a defender of jobs, “Folks here have watched mill after mill close across this state, always wondering if their mill is next.”

Gluesenkamp Perez's campaign marketed her as "cutting red tape for small businesses," including gutting regulations designed to prevent workers from being killed. She also voted in January alongside the Republicans to fully fund the Department of Homeland Security, which included continued funding for the murderous rampage of ICE agents.

The rupture also exposes the culpability of the Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers (AWPPW) apparatus, which organizes the 375 workers at the Nippon Dynawave Packaging plant. In a statement released Wednesday, Josh Estes, a Washington lobbyist for the bureaucracy, attempted to dilute outrage at the company over the tragedy, stating, "We understand families want answers immediately, and emotions are understandably very high," but that "Right now, our focus remains on supporting families, respecting the recovery effort, and standing beside the workers, responders, and community impacted by this tragedy."

There has also been essentially no mention from these figures about the ongoing issues at the site. Ongoing recovery efforts were delayed Wednesday morning because of what the fire department described as "safety concerns of the structural integrity of the damaged tank."

The vessel held white liquor, a corrosive solution that is a mixture of sodium hydroxide and sodium sulfide used to break down wood chips into pulp. Inhalation or contact with the skin causes burns and about 25,000 gallons remain inside the damaged structure and continue to leak slowly.

Water testing also confirmed that white liquor had reached the Columbia River, one of the largest waterways in North America. Ferguson said about a dozen dead carp had been removed from a dike near the site. Officials warned residents to stay away from ditches and dikes. The state Department of Ecology said the chemical cannot be skimmed or collected, as oil would be and must "self-neutralize" with water over time. Neither the Department of Ecology nor the fire department has put a timeline on how long the neutralization will take, when the slow leak from the damaged tank will stop or how many long-term health impacts local and downstream residents will face in the coming weeks, months and years.

The Longview disaster is not an isolated accident but part of a continuous series of workplace deaths, explosions and toxic releases under American capitalism. Since Trump's return to the White House, federal and state governments have continued dismantling what remains of the regulatory apparatus. The result has been even more workers have been killed, maimed and poisoned in workplaces across the country.

On May 22, 57-year-old immigrant worker Xiaoyuan Li was killed and more than two dozen firefighters injured in an explosion at the May Ship Repair shipyard on Staten Island,

New York. Last week, 50,000 residents in Orange County, California, were evacuated after a chemical tank leak at an aerospace facility threatened a massive toxic explosion. In April 2025, Stellantis machine repairman Ronald Adams Sr. was crushed at a Michigan engine plant. In January 2026, a subcontractor died after falling into an industrial vat at the Bayway Chemical Plant in New Jersey.

This toll has unfolded alongside an open campaign of deregulation from the Trump administration. Trump's January 31, 2025 executive order, "Unleashing Prosperity Through Deregulation," directed federal agencies to identify 10 regulations to be repealed for every new one issued. "You put a new regulation on, you have to get rid of 10," the president said.

Trump's directive does not represent a break with the prior period, but the public acceleration of a trajectory both capitalist parties have pursued for decades. Under the Trump administration, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is being cut by 8 percent and is losing more than 12 percent of its staff, reductions that, by one estimate, will mean that each American workplace can expect a safety inspection once every 266 years. The new head of OSHA previously served as a safety executive at Amazon and UPS.

These conditions are the product of a social system in which workers' lives are treated as an accounting entry on the production schedule. The state regulatory apparatus, the union bureaucracies and the political establishment—Trump's Republicans and the Fergusons, Murrays and Gluesenkamp Perez's Democrats alike—do not function as a check on this system. They are its administrative scaffolding.

The decisive question raised by the deaths in Longview is the building of independent rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves, to take direct control of the conditions under which they labor.



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