Southern California chemical crisis was one warning too many: millions are living inside a ticking bomb

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For five days last month, roughly 50,000 residents of Garden Grove and nearby communities lived under the threat of disaster. A refrigeration valve failure at GKN Aerospace triggered a dangerous chemical reaction that could have produced a Boiling Liquid Expanding Vapor Explosion (BLEVE).

What prevented the disaster was a crack in the tank wall that relieved pressure, allowing about 7,000 gallons of runaway methyl methacrylate monomer to cool and partially solidify, thereby preventing an explosion that would have ignited a destructive fireball with incalculable consequences. Hazmat teams from the Orange County Fire Authority used nine million gallons of water to keep the tank's temperature within a narrow safe range and averted the worst.

But while evacuation orders have been lifted, the crisis is far from over. Decades of corporate cost-cutting and deregulation have produced the conditions for disaster in Garden Grove. Adding to this is the growing stresses imposed by climate change. These conditions are replicated in countless locations across California and throughout the US.

The plant is still running on a 15.5-acre site right next to homes and neighborhoods, with 13 schools located just a few miles from the vicinity. It's still storing flammable's in old tanks under a lot of pressure. Before the accident, and despite failure to maintain the existing equipment, GKN Aerospace was also planning to expand the factory to produce F-35 canopy components for the US military.

Official statements have attempted to convey a sense of safety in the surrounding neighborhoods. Dr. Regina Chinsio-Kwong of the Orange County Health Care Agency (OCHA), in charge of cleanup activities and neutralized MMA removal, assured the public that they "can feel safe" and "should feel comfortable going home, even if you're across the street from that new zone line," while warning "temporary, intermittent odors may occur during this activity. MMA has a distinctive fruity or plastic-like odor."

Authorities relied heavily on photoionization detectors (PIDs) to determine safe levels, but these instruments cannot identify specific chemicals and can produce unreliable readings in conditions of high humidity and steam. They also cannot detect condensed chemical droplets or trace residues that may settle on soil, buildings or indoor surfaces.

These concerns recall the aftermath of the East Palestine, Ohio derailment, where federal agencies used similar technology to declare areas safe, only for independent testing later to uncover contamination that official monitoring had entirely missed.

The GKN near-disaster is not an isolated incident. The EPA's Office of Inspector General identified 25 high-priority facilities nationwide releasing ethylene oxide, a carcinogenic gas, at levels associated with elevated lifetime cancer risks. In 16 of those communities, residents had not even been informed of the danger.

California provides multiple examples. In the first five months of 2026 alone, the chemical incident tracker "Coalition to Prevent Chemical Disasters" reported nine accidents, including GKN Aerospace.

Most notably in Southern California, at the Torrance Refinery, a 2015 explosion hurled a 40-ton piece of debris that narrowly missed a storage tank containing large quantities of Modified Hydrofluoric Acid, a substance capable of causing severe injury and death through inhalation. Although federal investigators have repeatedly urged replacement of MHF with safer alternatives, refinery operators have resisted, citing cost concerns.

In San Pedro, the Rancho LPG facility stores roughly 25 million gallons of butane and propane on the active Palos Verdes Fault, near homes, businesses and recreational facilities. Engineering studies have warned that a major seismic event could produce mass casualties, yet the facility continues operating under decades-old environmental approvals.

The region has also experienced the long-term

consequences of industrial contamination. For decades, the former Exide Technologies battery recycling plant in Vernon released lead, arsenic, benzene and other toxic substances, contaminating thousands of residential properties.

Across the country, the same pattern repeats. In Conyers, Georgia, a 2024 fire at the BioLab chemical facility released a massive toxic chlorine plume forcing thousands to evacuate, leaving many with long-term respiratory damage. In Pennsylvania, over 4,000 students attend school near a methane processing facility, and 3,200 children sit one mile from a bleach precursor plant. Business continues as usual.

The Hopewell, Virginia industrial corridor hosts major chemical operations that have accumulated over 66 Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act violations. In 2020, Hurricane Laura triggered a severe chemical plant fire in Westlake, Louisiana, releasing chlorine and nitrogen oxide gases into the atmosphere, which prompted emergency stay-at-home orders.

In 2013, an ammonium nitrate explosion in West, Texas, killed 15 people and destroyed over 150 buildings. Because the Risk Management Program did not cover this chemical, no emergency plan existed, a regulatory gap that persists for many hazards today.

Internationally, the same pattern has produced some of the worst industrial catastrophes in modern history: Minamata, Bhopal, Chernobyl, Fukushima and Rana Plaza, each exposing the deadly consequences of subordinating human life to profit.

The danger of hazardous facilities operating in close proximity to densely populated communities is increasing due to the policies of the state.

In the US, the political responsibility for this situation lies entirely on both parties of American capitalism. EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin's "Common Sense Approach to Chemical Accident Prevention" rule, formally proposed in February 2026, systematically destroyed existing safety standards. It eliminated independent third-party audits after chemical releases and deleted mandatory evaluation of climate and power-loss risks. It even rescinded worker rights to anonymously report safety hazards.

The Trump administration has gone further still, moving to shut down the Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board entirely, the independent agency responsible for investigating exactly the kinds of accidents that nearly destroyed Garden Grove last month.

In California, Governor Gavin Newsom, who positioned himself as a national Democratic leader and potential presidential candidate, has a record of suspending environmental protections when corporate interests demand it, vetoing California Senate Bill 674 in August 2024.

SB 674 would have established uniform statewide fenceline air monitoring, mandated real-time public alerts during toxic releases and required third-party audits within 14 days of any incident. These were not radical demands. They were minimal protections. Newsom vetoed them anyway, leaving communities in West Long Beach, Carson and Wilmington without basic access to real-time safety data.

Underlying all of this is the growing physical instability introduced by climate change, what industrial safety researchers call "Natech" events: natural hazards triggering technological disasters. The GKN crisis was a Natech event in embryo. Methyl methacrylate must be kept at or below 50°F to remain stable.

As Southern California summers shatter heat records, the thermal loads on industrial cooling systems increase dramatically and compound the probability of exactly the kind of valve failure that occurred on May 21. Capitalism has created the climate crisis while simultaneously destroying the regulatory infrastructure that might partially buffer its industrial consequences.

The policy recommendations circulating in environmental advocacy circles, like better monitoring technology, stricter zoning, independent safety boards, are not without merit as immediate demands. Workers and communities should fight for every protection available. But no lasting solution can be built on the foundation of capitalism, and none can be confined to national borders.

The chemical corporations that operate these facilities are multinational entities that shift capital and production, as well as risk, across jurisdictions precisely to escape accountability. Competing national capitalist states bid for investment and are ready to reduce or eliminate any obstacle.

The international working class, including the workers who produce the chemicals, operate the refineries, live in the fenceline communities and breathe the contaminated air, is the only social force with both the interest and the capacity to impose rational, democratic control over industrial production. The working class cannot afford to wait for another near-miss.