

2 weeks after deadly Brent Industries explosion in Toledo, Ohio families, residents demand answers

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Two weeks after a deadly explosion ripped through Brent Industries in Toledo, Ohio, the families of the deceased workers and community members are still seeking answers to the cause of the disaster and the potential broader environmental impact on residents of the area.

Two workers died in the early hours of August 18 as a result of two explosions at the industrial textile-recycling/dry-cleaning site on South Avenue. They have been identified as Heladio G. Perez, age 46, and Mary Allen, age 64. An autopsy revealed they both died as a result of blunt force trauma. The blast partially collapsed the building and blew out the wall and the roof.

Up to 100 fire personnel were called in to fight the blaze. Twelve workers were inside the building at the time; 10 others escaped. However, two or three workers reportedly received minor injuries. While up to 100 fire personnel were called in to fight the blaze. Smoke and flames hampered search and rescue efforts for the two missing workers, whose bodies were recovered and identified only later.

The company is an industrial reconditioning and recycling facility for textiles that contain hazardous and non-hazardous materials, including shop towels and work gloves used in auto and other manufacturing industries. It has locations in Brent, Alabama and Toledo, Ohio. Neither Brent Industries nor any of its officials has issued any public statements since the explosion or offered condolences to the families of the two workers killed at the facility.

In Facebook posts, thousands paid tribute and offered condolences to the families of the deceased workers.

One of the workers who lost their lives, Mary Allen, is survived by her two daughters and three grandsons. During a vigil the evening following the explosion, dozens of family members and neighbors attended. Mary Allen's daughter, Lenore Bangura, described her mother in an interview broadcast on local media as a loving, hardworking woman who left a lasting impact on everyone around her. "My mom is nothing short of amazing. She's just a black rose in the concrete."

Bangura said her 64-year-old mother spent 13 years working

at Brent Industries and was deeply committed to her job.

"She was dedicated to this place," Bangura said. "She would wake up at like 2:00, 3:00 in the morning to be here at 5:00." She added, "It makes me feel good because I know that my mom touched everybody," she said. "My mom had an impact on most of these people's lives when they were babies."

In the wake of the explosion and fire, residents who live near the site have reported experiencing symptoms like coughing and wheezing, headaches and sore throats, as well as concerns about air quality. The Toledo City Council set a meeting of its Sustainability Committee for September 2 to address the progress of the investigation.

Chris, who lives close to the Brent Industries plant, told WTOL11 news last week, "It felt like someone picked up my house and dropped it." He said that he and other residents of the largely working-class neighborhood in south Toledo were in the dark about what chemicals may have been released. "We are concerned that the company be transparent about what chemicals are on site so we can give that information to credentialed experts, who can then tell us what issues may arise." He added, "My concern is that we don't know ... There are a lot of elderly and disabled people who live in this area. ... They are my neighbors. I don't want to see anyone get harmed."

A spokesperson with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said that Brent Industries listed Stoddard solvent (a potentially combustible cleaning solution) and sulfuric acid in its comprehensive inventory of hazardous chemicals stored at the facility. While initial testing by the EPA and Toledo Environmental Services found no air or water hazards, residents are rightly skeptical, recalling the train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, where Norfolk Southern, abetted by the EPA, attempted to cover up the release of dangerous chemicals into the air and water. Residents have called for independent testing and evaluation for any environmental impacts.

This is not the first fatal explosion at a Brent Industries industrial laundry factory. In 2015, an explosion at the Brent, Alabama plant killed 35-year-old Keith Leverette. He had been operating a commercial washer using 150 gallons of mineral

spirit. The US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) reported that the explosion was caused by the “ignition of the mineral spirits ... most likely resulting from an electrical spark being generated when a sling with metal grommets was inadvertently placed into the washer.”

The company was later cited by OSHA for multiple serious violations, including not providing employees with “adequate training regarding the potential fire hazards associated with inserting laundry bags with sewn-in metal grommets into the Washex machines.” The company ended up being fined a paltry \$27,000 for negligence related to the death.

The Toledo Fire Department reported responding to multiple fires and hazmat situations at Brent Industries since 2011. According to WTOL11, crews from Toledo and Jerusalem Township responded to a fire at Brent Industries on October 10, 2024.

“Eight days later, crews responded to a small fire at the business. At the time, Toledo Fire officials told WTOL 11 that the department frequently responds to incidents at the South Avenue facility, and they were working with the company to figure out preventative measures.”

The same day as the explosion at Brent Industries, Andrew “Andy” Nelson Block, a 43-year-old maintenance worker, was crushed to death while working at the Kaiser Aluminum manufacturing plant in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Will Lehman, the Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for United Auto Workers president, visited the Brent Industries location Wednesday during a campaign stop in Toledo where he spoke to workers at the nearby Stellantis Toledo Assembly Complex and Dana Driveline plant. In a statement on the deaths of Heladio G. Perez and Mary Allen, Lehman said:

They went to work to earn a living. They didn’t come home.

Their families have no answers. We’re told it was an “accident.” As if no one was responsible. But Brent Industries knew. This company has a history of safety violations—in Alabama, and here in Toledo. The dangers were known. They were tolerated. Because fixing them costs money.

This is American capitalism. Every company puts profit before our lives. Over 5,000 workers die on the job every year in this country. Tens of thousands more die from disease caused by their work. Our workplaces are a slaughterhouse.

And Toledo knows this better than most cities in America.

In 2022, two brothers—Ben and Max Morrissey—burned to death in an explosion at the BP-Husky refinery. Investigators found their deaths were preventable. BP was fined \$156,000. For two lives.

In 2024, Antonio Gaston was crushed on the line at the Toledo Jeep plant. He was 53. A father of four. Stellantis was fined \$16,000. They contested it. They paid \$11,000 for his life.

In 2025, Ronald Adams Sr., another Stellantis worker, was crushed by a gantry crane at the nearby Dundee Engine plant. Sixteen months later, his family still has no answers. Not from Stellantis. Not from the UAW. Not from the state. The plant just went back to running. As if he never existed.

Now add Heladio Perez and Mary Allen to that list.

It doesn’t matter if the plant has a union, or is non-union, like Brent Industries.

At the union plants, the company-union safety committees did nothing to stop deaths and injuries. They exist to give the illusion that workers have a voice. While management and union officials keep the line running. No matter the cost.

Union or not—the result is the same. Workers pay with their lives.

The answer is workers organizing ourselves. Independent of the company. Independent of any union bureaucracy.

I’m running for UAW president to fight for this. Abolish the company-union safety committees. Replace them with rank-and-file safety committees. Run by workers, on every shop floor—union and non-union alike. Give workers full access to every record. Give workers the power to stop production when conditions are unsafe.

No company investigation will ever tell the truth. No bureaucracy will either. Only the workers standing next to the machine know what really happened.

To the families of Heladio Perez and Mary Allen, you are not alone. Your fight is our fight.

To every worker in Toledo and everywhere else, this fight is about putting an end to a system that sacrifices our lives for profit. We produce all the wealth in this society. We are the only ones who can fight for ourselves.

Form a rank-and-file committee in your workplace. Union or not. Take control of safety.



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