

Explosion kills 12 steelworkers in Tlaxcala, central Mexico

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Twelve steelworkers were killed on Wednesday morning after a furnace exploded in the Mexican state of Tlaxcala, located east of Mexico City. One more worker was severely injured with burns on his face and arms.

According to a preliminary report by the state government, at around 3:15 a.m., steel pouring from a “tower” came into contact with water and “generated a reaction,” igniting an entire wing of the steel mill. There were 35 workers on the night shift. Other media reports point to overheating and faulty equipment.

Several neighbors in the town of Xaloztoc woke up to the initial fire and filmed the moment when a massive fireball erupted from the plant. Footage of the aftermath shared on social media showed the charred structure and bodies, resembling scenes from a war.

Management wasted precious time by blocking emergency teams from entering, claiming that company brigades were already handling matters.

The bodies were not recovered until nearly 7 p.m. and had to be identified through DNA samples.

The company, Mexico-based multinational Simec, already signed an agreement on a joint response with state governor Lorena Cuellar Cisneros, who belongs to the nominally “left” Morena party of President Claudia Sheinbaum.

Cuellar immediately came to the defense of the company on Wednesday, stressing that the last safety inspection took place in April. “Everything is in order in this company. There are constant inspections. We know that there was a situation here that we cannot yet comment on, but we are investigating what the causes were,” she said.

With the backing of the government, Simec ordered workers in other areas to show up the following morning, to work a few feet from where their co-

workers had been incinerated hours earlier.

The anger among the workers was such, however, that they refused to return to work. The local union, which belongs to the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), a gangster-ridden arm of the state and management, said the 259 union members at the plant would not work until labor authorities “certify” that conditions are safe.

The union’s statement, however, is merely an effort to dodge its own responsibility for the accident, suggesting it is all in the government’s hands. This also opens the door for a swift return to work, with the Labor Ministry already hurrying to carry out an extraordinary inspection to give the green light.

Relatives of the victims and their co-workers have told the media that the company ignored reports of faulty equipment. They are demanding that the plant be closed until conditions are actually safe.

Reyes Gutiérrez García, a relative of one of the workers burned to death in the plant, Juan Avendaño, 35, said: “I know that it was reported earlier that a mobile crane where the ore container was transported was about to collapse; and they did not pay any attention, they did not care until it reached its limit, fell down, and spilled from above on the fellow workers, may they rest in peace.”

He added: “How is it possible that they don’t act when the operators are telling them that there is a faulty piece of equipment. They told me that this equipment had already been reported for three weeks when it was already totally faulty.”

He said there have been other accidents caused by the lack of safety protocols, which has led many to resign.

“I lost a family member, I didn’t lose just anything,” he said, stressing that Avendaño leaves behind three children.

Dulce, the partner of a young worker killed in the blast, Leonardo Saldivar, told the Mexican daily *Milenio* that “this was no accident.” She explained: “My partner had told me that the machinery was already faulty, and he was the one working on it. The only thing I ask of the governor of Tlaxcala and the authorities is that they close the company. This time these were the victims, but what about later, how many more?... I don’t want money, I just want justice, it’s not the first time this kind of thing has happened, it’s a company that doesn’t have the right safety measures in place.”

As indicated by the relatives, the inspections by the government have proven to be compromised, and this applies to any investigation overseen by the same authorities.

Former President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his successor, Sheinbaum as mayor of Mexico City, proved to be entirely indifferent to the safety and lives of workers and committed to safeguarding the key supply chains of US and Canadian transnationals and their Mexican partners at all costs. In early 2020, López Obrador and Sheinbaum agreed to reopen key North American suppliers, including Simec, sacrificing hundreds of thousands of lives to the COVID-19 virus.

Simec owner Rufino Vigil Gonzalez, known in Mexico as the “King of Steel,” was among those who benefitted the most from this criminal policy. His fortune jumped from \$1.2 billion in 2020 to \$3.4 billion this year, according to Forbes.

Simec advertises as the only producer of leaded steel in North America and makes special bar quality (SBQ) steel, steel wire, rebar and commercial and structural steel long products. It is a key supplier of special steel necessary for major industries, including automotive, aeronautics, energy valves and pipes, agricultural equipment, among others. It maintains four plants in Mexico and seven in the United States, as well as subsidiaries in Brazil and the Netherlands.

Last August, Simec fired 500 workers at its US branch, Republic Steel, when it idled steel mills in Canton, Ohio and Lackawanna, New York to “consolidate” production at its “state-of-the-art” facilities in Tlaxcala, where the scaffolding falls apart and incinerates workers.

The deal signed by the company and the government on Wednesday vows to pay a meager 100,000 pesos

(\$4,930) as compensation and 20,000 pesos for funeral expenses (\$986) per worker, which the relatives have not agreed to. Only four unionized workers will get an additional life insurance payment from the CTM, the amount of which the union refuses to disclose.

The explosion in Tlaxcala was no “accident” but an act of social murder tied to the deliberate policy of securing corporate and national “competitiveness” by downgrading safety measures and working conditions. This policy could not be enforced without the trade unions and politicians pitting workers of different countries against each other in a race to the bottom.

In order to make the families whole and secure the right to a safe job and a living wage regardless of the country of operations, the ill-gotten fortune of Vigil Gonzalez and Simec need to be expropriated and transformed into public property under workers’ control. Moreover, an inquest into the deadly explosion, with independent experts, must be organized and overseen by the workers themselves to establish criminal responsibility.

To advance these demands requires that steelworkers at Simec across the Americas establish rank-and-file committees opposed to the union bureaucracies and all capitalist parties as part of the International Workers Alliance for Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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