

2 workers killed, 11 injured in Louisville, Kentucky plant explosion

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A deadly explosion at Givaudan Sense Colour factory killed two workers and injured 11 Tuesday in the historic neighborhood of Clifton in Louisville, Kentucky. The cause of the explosion is still under investigation.

Givaudan manufactures food colorings, particularly the caramel coloring for soft drinks, a process involving a wide variety of chemicals. The company's largest single shareholder is Bill Gates, who owns 14 percent of the company.

The explosion occurred just east of downtown Louisville at 3:00 p.m., shattering windows of nearby homes and cutting power to the area. Firefighters responded to a "hazardous materials incident" and issued a shelter-in-place warning for a one-mile radius from the site.

Louisville Fire Chief Brian O'Neill told local news that an evacuation order was issued for houses in the two blocks surrounding the site because their windows were "blown out," and residents could not safely shelter in place.

The blast at the Givaudan Sense Colour plant was felt at least three miles away in Jeffersonville, Indiana, across the Ohio River from Louisville.

At least one residential building in the vicinity of Givaudan has already been condemned due to damage from the explosion, forcing residents to vacate the property immediately. Speaking to local news, Shelby Dix said her family of four were told to "grab as much as we can, which it's kind of hard when you're living paycheck-to-paycheck to get a U-Haul to move all your stuff out."

Dix's partner Craig Wilson described how the roof of the apartment building caved in on him moments after the explosion. Massive pieces of debris, some the size of cars, pierced the walls of apartments and took down

power lines, which set the cars below on fire. "[T]he whole apartment is just destroyed, all of our cars are just destroyed," Wilson said.

Authorities warned residents not to touch the debris, which is covered with black, tar-like substance. According to Fire Chief O'Neill, a drone sent into the area to monitor air quality found no evidence of any hazardous emissions released into the air. Testing of sprinkler runoff at the site showed no indication of hazardous substances.

Several workers injured in the blast were sent to the University of Louisville hospital, where they underwent decontamination for potential hazardous materials and were then treated for blast injuries, thermal injuries and crush injuries from fallen debris, according to hospital officials.

Austin Jagers, a 29-year-old industrial maintenance technician, succumbed to his injuries in the hospital, according to his family. He leaves behind a wife and four-year old daughter.

The second victim was found after midnight. Initial reports from Givaudan accounted for all of its employees; however, that was not the case. The company blamed a "miscommunication," which resulted in firefighters reentering the explosion site, despite the potential for a secondary collapse in the facility, and carefully searching for three and a half hours through the smoldering rubble for a missing worker.

This is not the first deadly explosion at the plant, which has operated in Clifton since 1948. Before it was acquired by Givaudan in 2021, the plant was owned by D.D. Williamson. In 2003, one worker was killed, and 26 others were injured when an 8-foot-tall food additive processing tank exploded because there was no pressure release valve on the tank.

Shrapnel from the explosion hit an ammonia tank, which led to the release of an estimated 26,000 pounds of aqueous ammonia over a five-hour period, resulting in evacuations and a shelter-in-place order for 1,500 residents. The company was fined \$10,000.

The facility, ensconced in an upscale residential area, has been a problematic neighbor for decades. According to local archives, it sprayed caramel onto homes on nearby Haldeman Street in 1965 and again in 1970.

In 1996, a D.D. Williamson tank car carrying 20,000 gallons of ammonium bisulfite ruptured, spilling the additive over nearby homes.

The company paid a total of \$600,000 in civil fines to the US Department of Justice and the Louisville Metro Air Pollution Control District to resolve violations of the Clean Water Act in 2009.

In 2023, Givaudan was cited for failing to notify the district about unspecified excessive emissions, not submitting annual compliance certifications and reports in a timely manner, and not abiding by permit requirements concerning monitoring, recording and inspections. The company paid only \$7,500 in fines.

A Givaudan worker spoke to local media about her attempts to raise her concerns about a sulfur dioxide leak to the company management. Angelita Oldham filed a report earlier this year with the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) after her concerns were ignored by the company.

“We have a lot of leaks of SO₂ (sulfur dioxide) that I had to voice my concern about,” she said. “It wasn’t fixed. I don’t know why it leaks or why not, but I know I have to have my job, so you kind of deal with it, and I did.”

So far, no inspections or other actions at the plant have resulted from the worker’s complaint.

Due to an anomaly in local codes, Givaudan Sense Colour’s Louisville factory is literally an industrial zoned island surrounded by historic Victorian homes, small offices and businesses, and restaurants. Efforts by residents to have the facility moved in the past were quashed. In fact, after the deadly 2003 explosion, the company spent \$6.8 million to rebuild and expand the plant on the site.

Louisville Metro Council Member Andrew Owen told local news that the facility’s zoning would not be legal and was grandfathered into the city’s zoning code

at some point. Louisville Mayor Craig Greenberg has conveyed that there are better locations in Louisville for this facility than in the Clifton area.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives is aiding local and state officials in the investigation of the incident, which is expected to take months.



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