

# Explosion at Tyson poultry plant in Camilla, Georgia, leaves 1 dead and several injured

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An explosion at a Tyson Foods poultry plant occurred in the early hours of December 27, sending shockwaves throughout the plant and affecting workers and their families. A scene of chaos followed the explosion as workers scrambled to find safety. About 1,600 people work in the plant.

Initial investigations suggest that the blast originated in a boiler room, although the exact cause is still under investigation by local authorities and occupational safety officials.

One person was killed, a 61-year-old woman whom the Miller County coroner's office identified as Bajarma Batozhapov. The Las Vegas woman was sleeping in a truck when the explosion occurred, having traveled to the Camilla plant in search of work. Her husband, a truck driver, was not hurt.

Several other workers sustained injuries; some were treated on-site, while others required hospitalization. The Tyson Foods plant dominates the town's economy, which has a population of only 5,000 people.

Katoria Peterson and her grandfather, Larry Thompson, live across from the plant, told WTXL they'd never seen anything like this before.

Peterson told the station, "It was a loud boom, and then you see the flames. It was about five to ten minutes of burning. And then the ambulance and everybody left, but it burned for a few minutes.

Thompson added, "I know many people that work there, and they're from all around. Some of them are at work now. I don't understand why they're at work now because if you can smell it—I can smell it from my window—it's just the smell of burning. So, if I can smell it, I know it's worse over there."

Stuart Appelbaum, president of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) and Edgar Fields, president of the Southeast Council of the

RWDSU, declared in a statement that "We are working with the company and local emergency authorities to ensure that all the workers impacted are taken care of. The health and safety of workers must be a top priority at poultry plants, and we are working to assist anyone injured last night ... It is too early to tell what happened last night, but there must be a thorough investigation into this incident, and workers must be able to work safely in the facility."

Tyson Foods expressed its condolences to the deceased's family and emphasized its commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of its employees. "We are deeply saddened by this tragic incident and are cooperating fully with the investigation," the statement read. "Our thoughts are with the affected families during this difficult time."

Both statements are dripping with hypocrisy. The explosion sheds light on unsafe working conditions which are pervasive across the United States and the meatpacking industry in particular. The industry has some of the highest injury rates of any in the country, and relies on a super-exploited workforce, with substantial numbers of undocumented immigrants and even child labor. In 2023, Tyson was reportedly under investigation for child labor in one of its plants in Virginia.

In July 2022, 22-year-old Casen Garcia, father of a 14-month-old child, died on the job at a Tyson Foods plant in Joslin, Illinois. "I'm told it was 120 degrees in that basement, and Casen always talked about the smell of ammonia," Garcia's mother Rose told the WWS. "Two days before he died, he said, 'Mom, I can't believe no one's died down there.'"

Michael Felsen, a lawyer for nearly four decades at the US Department of Labor, who now works as an adviser for the National Council for Occupational

Safety and Health, wrote an email to *In These Times*, “Recent studies show that meat and poultry processing plants continue to have higher severe injury rates than other occupations also considered hazardous, like sawmills, building construction, and oil and gas drilling.” He added, “workers are routinely and repeatedly exposed to moving machine parts that can cause traumatic injuries, including crushing, amputating, slicing, and burning. And the cumulative trauma of repeating the same motions thousands of times a day often causes severe and disabling musculoskeletal injuries, the result of what is known as ‘ergonomic hazards.’”

Felsen continued, “Reports from the Government Accountability Office and other sources show that worker injuries are very likely to be seriously underreported.” Many companies have punitive point systems in which workers who miss work because of injuries are assigned points that could lead to being fired, and he cites the in-house clinics as a way for companies to keep injuries under wraps.

“Workers are often intimidated into not reporting work-related injuries and illnesses out of fear of being fired. So, even the high recordable injury rates these processing plants show are undoubtedly misleadingly low,” Felsen said. “The situation is even worse than it appears.”

The meatpacking industry was also a key vector for the spread of coronavirus in the opening weeks of the pandemic in 2020. Here, the role of the unions, including the RWDSU and the United Food and Commercial Workers union, was to force workers to remain on the job, rejecting widespread demands by workers to carry out lockdowns to save lives.

In Waterloo, Iowa, the UFCW worked with managers at a Tyson pork plant to institute an attendance bonus in early 2020 in the midst of an outbreak which would eventually kill five workers. Managers at the plant organized a betting pool over how many workers at the plant would get infected. The following year, stonewalling by the union local in response to a local government investigation prompted the county sheriff to declare, “They’re using the same playbook that corporate Tyson is using, which I thought was kind of weird.”

“The first thought I had was, ‘Shame on Tyson corporate,’” the sheriff declared, adding, “But that was

very closely followed by, ‘Doesn’t Tyson have a union that should be protecting these people? And if they don’t, why don’t they? And if they do, where the hell are they?’”

Tyson has now been charged over the deaths of four workers at the plant: Sedika Buljic, Reberiano Garcia Leno, Jose Ayala, and Isidro Fernandez.

As bad as they are, conditions at Tyson are not unique. A Congressional report found that at least 59,000 workers were infected with COVID-19, and 269 died between March 2020 and February 2021 at Tyson Foods, Smithfield Foods, JBS, Cargill, and National. Despite these numbers, Tyson announced in February 2022 that it was ending its company-wide policy of masking for all vaccinated workers.



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