

# Impact Plastics sent fast food gift cards to grieving families while denying wrongdoing in the deaths of six employees during Hurricane Helene

Jane Wise  
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“Sorry your loved one died, best we can do is a hot meal” was the holiday greeting Impact Plastics’ management chose to send last month to the families of the workers who perished in the catastrophic flooding at their plant during Hurricane Helene in September.

Instead of accepting responsibility for their role in the tragedy, the Erwin, Tennessee, company sent \$100 gift cards to the grieving families in December. This callous act is a stark illustration of the capitalist class’s utter disregard for the lives, and deaths, of the working class.

The families of the deceased, along with surviving employees, received gift cards to McDonald’s, Walmart and Pal’s, another fast-food restaurant in the area. Guillermo Mendoza, whose mother Bertha Mendoza died in the flood, stated that it felt like the company was saying, “Your mom died. Go get a burger.” Robert Jarvis, a surviving employee, expressed shock and offense at receiving the gift cards, saying, “That is how they treated us and what they thought about us.”

The tragedy at Impact Plastics unfolded on September 27, 2024, when Hurricane Helene caused devastating flooding that swept away six Impact Plastics workers. The victims, Rosa Maria Andrade Reynoso, Monica Hernandez, Bertha Mendoza, Johnny Peterson, Lidia Verdugo, and Sibrina Barnett, sought refuge on a semi-truck trailer after being trapped in the flooding parking lot of the Riverview Industrial Park. When the trailer was struck by floating debris, it overturned, tossing the workers into the raging flood waters of the Nolichucky River.

The deaths at Impact Plastics were entirely preventable. In anticipation of the potential damage from Helene, Impact Plastics CFO Susan Chambers sent an email on September 25 telling managers and supervisors to turn off their computers when they left Friday “since power will be down over the weekend.”

On the morning of September 27, the National Weather Service issued an urgent flash flood emergency text alert at 9:20 a.m., instructing people to move to higher ground immediately. Despite this alert, at 9:28 a.m. production controller Sarah Vance sent an email pushing a 10:30 a.m. meeting to 1 p.m., demonstrating that management intended to continue with business as usual.

By 10:39 a.m., the power went out at Impact Plastics, and the parking lot was already underwater. It took supervisors 11 minutes to dismiss workers, but by that time it was too late to leave the industrial park, which had only one way in and out.

In stark contrast, neighboring businesses in Riverview Industrial Park took heed of the flood warnings, closing down before the storm and advising workers to stay home.

Gerald O’Connor, CEO of Impact Plastics, rapidly released a video statement on October 3 denying any liability in the incident. O’Connor claimed that employees were told to leave the plant 45 minutes before the flooding hit the industrial park.

In a lawsuit filed by the family of Johnny Peterson, a longtime employee and supervisor at Impact Plastics who perished in the flood, claims that while senior management fled the premises, Peterson remained

behind to lead workers outside. Peterson's family is now filing a wrongful death lawsuit, which claims that workers were forced to stay even when management was aware of the growing danger.

Peterson's daughter revealed that O'Connor had called her family to express his condolences, stating that her father "did not leave with them when he had the opportunity to," contradicting O'Connor's initial claims and underscoring the dishonesty of company management.

The Peterson family's attorney, Alex Little, stated that there is substantial evidence that O'Connor was among the first to leave and had instructed workers to work that day because they "wanted to meet order deadlines."

Four of the six employees who died were immigrants from Mexico. Lidia Verdugo, Bertha Mendoza and Monica Hernandez had each lived in the small Appalachian community for two decades. Mendoza, who worked in quality control, leaves behind her husband and four children. She had worked alongside her sister, Araceli Mendoza, who was among the survivors.

Rosa Maria Andrade Reynoso had been working at Impact Plastics to bring her 10-year-old son to the United States. The families' frustration has been exacerbated by the fact that state officials were unable to do more to support survivors, as phone lines for reports on missing people were only available in English.

Jerry Barnett, husband of Sibrina Barnett, is still grieving the loss of his wife, who was among the victims. He describes her as a "workaholic" who took pride in her job and in spoiling her family. She worked at Impact Plastics on Fridays as part of her normal rotation.

Jerry recalls that Sibrina was not overly concerned about the rain on the morning of the flood and that she was more annoyed about the disruption to her schedule. By the time she was able to leave the plant, flood waters were already up to the doors of her car.

Sibrina sought refuge on the semi-truck trailer that eventually overturned in the flood. Jerry told local news that he has been unable to move Sibrina's belongings and is still struggling with her loss. He is thankful for the 37 years they had together.

Impact Plastics has denied responsibility for the

deaths of its employees. In a court filing responding to the wrongful death lawsuit filed by Johnny Peterson's family, Impact Plastics claimed that Peterson voluntarily went back to help other employees and that the company was not responsible for his actions. The company asserted that Peterson shared comparative fault for his own death for "failing to exercise reasonable care for his own safety."

The tragedy at Impact Plastics is a sobering reminder that, even in the face of natural disasters, the capitalist class will place its interests above the interests of the working class.



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