

Propane worker cites cost-cutting as cause of massive Toronto explosion

By Carl Bronski
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In an August 19 interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Henry Dufour, a temporarily laid-off worker at Toronto's Sunrise Propane Industrial Gas Plant, blamed unsafe work practices and cost-cutting for the massive explosion that rocked a north Toronto neighbourhood August 10.

"When you're looking to save a buck, you're looking for trouble," he stated.

Dufour, a veteran worker in the propane industry, cited practices at the ill-fated plant that he said he had never encountered anywhere else in his entire career. Whilst other companies maintained several emergency shut-off valves throughout their facilities, Sunrise management was content with only one valve. "If the guy's in the kiosk, he has to run across the yard to shut it down if there's an accident," Dufour said. "He won't make it in time, I'll guarantee you that. Propane explodes very fast."

Dufour also noted that many workers at the plant were unfamiliar with proper safety measures due to an inadequate training program offered by the company. Unsafe filling and loading processes were common practice at the facility.

The early morning explosion lit up the Toronto skyline with a series of massive fireballs. One worker, still unidentified, was killed in the facility, and 12,000 residents of the surrounding working class neighbourhood were forced to hastily evacuate. In the ensuing six-alarm response to extinguish the inferno, firefighter Bob Leek also died at the scene.

Shock waves from the blast inflicted heavy structural damage to six houses, rendering them uninhabitable. Scores of other houses suffered less severe damage. The force of the blast also distributed thousands of pieces of carcinogenic asbestos throughout the neighbourhood, raising concerns of a longer-term

health threat to the community.

Residents had complained to city, provincial and federal politicians for years about the close proximity of the plant to a residential neighbourhood. "I could see all their propane tanks piling up, piling up," resident Rosanna Iaboni told the CBC August 11. "It was a mess, it was dirty.... I'm angry. I'm furious. I'm frustrated."

Marco Viani, whose family had lived across the street from the facility, told the CBC that "everybody complained, saying why are they putting this station here? We complained to City Hall, MPs, politicians. Nobody listened to us. And we were all like, 'Something's going to happen,' and eventually it happened."

The incident in Toronto, like so many other tragedies in the province of Ontario over the past decade, can be directly traced back to the privatization of government safety inspection bodies under the former Conservative Party regime of right-wing Premier Mike Harris. Under his "Common Sense Revolution," closely modelled on the "Contract With America" nostrums of Newt Gingrich and the US Republican Party, Harris ended the government inspection of propane facilities, amusement park rides, boilers and elevators. He also privatized the province's water inspection operations, directly leading to seven deaths and hundreds of critical illnesses in the infamous Walkerton, Ontario, *E. coli* crisis several years later.

In 1996, Harris's government set up the private Technical Standards and Safety Authority (TSSA), which is largely staffed by representatives of the propane industry. It has now been named along with the municipal and provincial governments as culpable parties in a series of class action law suits already launched by North Toronto residents in the immediate

aftermath of the explosion.

At the time the Conservative legislation was enacted, the Liberal opposition denounced the privatization. Member of the Legislature Jim Bradley, who now sits as transportation minister in the current Liberal government of Premier Dalton McGuinty, stated eight years ago that “those who have a close connection to what is being supervised, and perhaps have a vested interest, are those who are now doing the supervising.”

However, the criticism was little more than cynical double-talk. In fact, the big business Liberal government, which has now been in power for five years, has refused to make any changes to the private regulatory system. For his own part, Premier McGuinty, presently enjoying the Olympic Games in Beijing, declined comment on the issues surrounding the explosion, preferring to allow the investigation to “take its course.”

Yet, many facts are already known and have further scandalized the local community. When the TTSA was asked to provide the Ontario government with a map of large propane facilities located in the province, they issued a mistake-riddled document that listed a large facility in Toronto that did not exist, a plant north of the city that had been sold 10 years ago and a propane installation in Toronto that was actually a townhouse development!

There are at least 337 propane tank-filling facilities in the Greater Toronto Area and 1,708 province-wide, which must be inspected by the TTSA every three years. Individual operators are allowed to do “self-inspections” in the interim. Current provincial regulations require only that propane filling tanks—not to be confused with corner gas station propane tank exchange facilities—be at least 300 feet from a school and 25 feet from a residence. Independent safety experts have consistently advised that large-scale propane filling facilities should be at least 1 mile from populated areas!

Scrutiny of the Sunrise propane company has given local and provincial residents even more cause for concern. In 2006, the company was issued several “cease-and-desist” orders for safety violations but was not shut down by the TTSA. One of the violations, considered a major breach by industry experts, was the transfer of propane directly from one tanker truck to another. Preliminary reports on the cause of the August

blast point to a similar violation.

Further, Sunrise Propane Industrial Gases, the overseer of the North Toronto plant, has operated under a number of different company names since 1999. In 2002, a company named at that time Sunrise Petroleum was found in court proceedings to have forged a supplier’s signature on company documents to avoid paying invoices in accounts owing. In the subsequent lawsuit, the presiding justice stated, “The judgement itself, I’m sure, speaks volumes on the ethics for Sunrise.” Indeed, the entire affair speaks volumes on the nature of the profit system itself.

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