

Forty hospitalized after toxic chemical leak in Chicago suburb

By Jessica Goldstein
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A disaster unfolded in the northern Chicago suburb of Beach Park in Lake County, Illinois on Thursday morning when a cloud of toxic anhydrous ammonia leaked into the air. At approximately 4:25 a.m., authorities were called to respond to a “possible vehicle fire” near North Green Bay Road and 29th Street. When sheriff’s deputies arrived at the scene they reported what appeared to be a “cloud of smoke” and were “overcome by an airborne chemical.”

The chemical emitted from a semi-trailer tank was later confirmed to be anhydrous ammonia, a chemical most often used in fertilizer and as an industrial refrigerant according to the Centers for Disease Control. A semi-truck was towing two separate two-ton containers of the chemical which began to leak out onto the road, releasing plumes of toxic gas into the surrounding air creating a cloud of poison which was originally thought to be smoke, although no actual fire occurred.

So far, 40 people have been hospitalized after inhaling the gas, including 11 firefighters. Seven victims remain in critical condition as of the time of this writing. A worker called 911 after driving through the gas cloud on her way to work and feeling as if she could not breathe.

The spill prompted a Level 5 Hazmat emergency response, and area schools announced closures early in the day due to the spill. Authorities issued a warning at around 5 a.m. on Twitter to residents living in a one-mile radius to stay inside with the windows closed and shut all HVAC systems off. The shelter-in-place order was lifted at 10 a.m. and roads reopened at 11 a.m.. The number of hospitalizations reported by the media continued to rise throughout the day, from 30 to 37 to 40.

ABC 7 News reported that residents woke in the

morning to the smell of burning, indicating the potency of the toxic gas which was released. Some residents left the area with their families after smelling the gas.

Those admitted to the hospital who remain in critical condition are being intubated. Patients who had inhaled the chemical were admitted with severe swelling of the vocal chords and upper airways and required mechanical ventilation.

27-year-old Javon Roy of Waukegan is one of those whose fate hangs in the balance as he remains in critical condition. His mother, Gloria Pruitt, is anxious for him to recover and told ABC 7, “He’s a hard strong worker and I want my baby back.”

According to the New York State Department of Health, ammonia is an extremely toxic substance which can result in many serious health effects if inhaled: “Ammonia is irritating and corrosive. Exposure to high concentrations of ammonia in air causes immediate burning of the nose, throat and respiratory tract. This can cause bronchiolar and alveolar edema, and airway destruction resulting in respiratory distress or failure. Inhalation of lower concentrations can cause coughing, and nose and throat irritation.”

While the driver of the vehicle involved in the spill itself is under investigation the name of the company in ownership of the tractor was not released, nor the reason or destination of the two tanks of ammonia. Lake County Sheriff’s Sgt. Chris Covelli said, “We are going to look and see if any laws were broken whether they be agricultural, traffic, criminal.”

A serious investigation into the possible responsibility of the companies involved in the transport of the chemicals or other conditions such as mechanical and road maintenance which could have caused dire emergencies such as the one in Beach Park is unlikely. In order to save money and reap the largest

amount of profit possible from the means of production, the capitalist class cuts back on spending money on preventative maintenance and infrastructure.

Several large and highly profitable corporations are headquartered in the area surrounding Beach Park, including Aon Hewitt, Abbott Labs, Solo Cup Company, and Swingline, a major manufacturer of office supplies. In contrast, a substantial number of residents work in low-wage and precarious jobs, and 7.7 percent of residents live in poverty.

Like the California wildfires which tore across the northern part of the state last year, there is no good reason why a disaster of this scale should occur in one of the wealthiest countries in the world. There is plenty of money to alert residents of disasters such as this, but beyond that, enough money exists to provide infrastructure and maintenance to prevent them from happening in the first place, and to fund research and development into chemicals which are far less toxic and can be used for industrial purposes. However, national, state and local officials would rather give that money to corporations to increase private profits and provide funding for policing at home and endless wars abroad.

The Beach Park disaster must be seen for what it is: not a freak accident, but the result of the irrationality of capitalism. Workers in the area should demand a thorough investigation into the cause of the chemical leak and demand full funding for adequate emergency response systems and infrastructure to protect residents from such disasters. This will not come from appeals to Democratic and Republican politicians, who serve corporate interests, but only from an organized movement of the working class through the building of rank-and-file neighborhood committees in the fight to take the means of production out of the hands of the corporate capitalist class in a struggle for socialism.

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