

Explosion at downtown Los Angeles warehouse injures 12 firefighters

By Peter Ross
19 May 2020

A fire at a warehouse in downtown Los Angeles Saturday night sparked an explosion that injured at least 12 firefighters.

Firefighters arriving to the scene entered the one-story building and climbed to the roof, noting only moderate smoke. As the fire in the rear of the building intensified, an evacuation was called, but a large explosion erupted with many still inside. Firefighters inside the warehouse were forced to run out of the burning building and climb down an aerial ladder engulfed in flames.

Captain Erik Scott, a spokesman for the Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD), said firefighters had to “go through a fireball” while climbing down the ladder, and described “a 30-foot tall blow torch,” that burned through protective gear, melting helmets and charring a firetruck across the street.

Twelve firefighters were rushed to the Los Angeles County-University of Southern California Medical Center for burn treatment, with four taken to the intensive burn care unit and two put on ventilators to treat smoke inhalation. The warehouse explosion spread the fire to adjacent buildings but was contained in about an hour by some 230 responders. As of Sunday, eight firefighters remained hospitalized, with two in critical, but stable, condition.

On Sunday, police and arson investigators launched a criminal probe into the cause of the fire.

While a cause has not yet been determined, Los Angeles Fire Department spokesman Nicholas Prange said butane canisters were found inside the warehouse, and LAFD Chief Ralph Terrazas said firefighters found butane canisters on the street when they arrived to the scene.

The warehouse in question was operated by SmokeTokes, a supplier for manufacturers of butane

hash oil, a marijuana extract used for ingestion or smoking. Butane is a highly flammable gas which has been the cause of numerous explosions and fires by businesses and people trying to produce hash oil at home. In 2016, a major fire took place at another store owned by SmokeTokes, located about a block away from the location of Saturday’s fire. The fire department reported in that incident that firefighters encountered “intense fire in dense and highly flammable storage” and “pressurized flammable gas cylinders, several of which were heard to explode.”

Local authorities have described SmokeTokes as a “ghost business, as it does not appear in local regulatory records.” Legally required placards indicating the presence of a flammable gas were not posted on the building’s exterior.

Saturday night’s fire took place in a five-block area dubbed “Bong Row” for its cannabis shops and warehouses. The area has become a center of black-market vaping products, which have previously been investigated for their possible connection to a mysterious respiratory illness linked to vaping devices. Bong Row is located next to the Warehouse District, which has been the site of a number of historic fires, including a 1997 explosion at the Imperial Toy Corporation factory that killed four workers and injured at least 25 others.

Just to the south, the Fashion District is home to garment manufacturing sweatshops where workers, predominantly undocumented immigrants, are pressured to perform repetitive tasks at unsafe speeds for 10 to 12 hours at a time, and for less than minimum wage. Wages as low as \$2.77 an hour were reported at sweatshops in the area last December in a *New York Times* investigation. A 2019 fire at the Payman Fabric warehouse in this district took more than 180

firefighters to extinguish and resulted in three injuries.

A study by the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education found garment factories in the Fashion District to be hot, dusty, poorly ventilated, rat-infested, and major fire hazards, with 42 percent of workers reporting that exits were regularly blocked or even locked by management.

The dilapidated, 100-year-old buildings that house these large and crowded factories and storage facilities are a daily hazard for tens of thousands of workers, as well as the many residents of low-income and largely unpermitted housing in this area.

Warehouse fires are dramatic examples of the drive by suppliers, as they attempt to contend with international competition, to impose dangerous working conditions and transform entire areas of major cities like Los Angeles into hubs of extreme industrial exploitation. Deregulation has been a determining factor in the process of compromising safety of the working environment. Lax regulation of these manufacturers, and practically nonexistent enforcement, has been essential in this process.

Ten blocks from City Hall, Downtown LA is a landscape of slums and sweatshops, of which the city's notorious Skid Row neighborhood, where sprawling "tent cities" line the sidewalks and thousands of the city's homeless live in horrific conditions, is only the starkest symbol.

The LAFD, starved for funds and lacking personnel as a consequence of years of budget cuts, is ill-equipped to deal with this increasingly hazardous situation. Fire services are being cut throughout California, despite the increased risk of wildfires, including, in Los Angeles County, the La Tuna Fire in 2017, the Woolsey Fire in 2018 and the Saddleridge Fire in 2019.

Aging and outdated equipment, along with unsafe staffing levels, puts both firefighters and civilians in danger. Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti has seized on the COVID-19 pandemic to announce a "fiscal emergency" budget that will include unpaid furloughs for city workers and further starve public services of funds. The proposed budget exempts LA police officers and firefighters, but would force furloughs on most support personnel.

To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>