



A Retrospective of the Carbide Explosion



Blog for Air Justice

On this day--March 21st--13 years ago, residents in Louisville's West End experienced a routine, if not tranquil, afternoon. Just like 5:00 pm on any other day, the sun filtered through the clouds and bathed the area in its gentle glow. Just 30 minutes later, however, this tranquility shattered as a thunderous explosion ripped through the Carbide plant off Bells Lane. Chaos engulfed the scene, debris rained down, a fire erupted, and an otherwise peaceful afternoon turned into devastation.

Amidst the smoke, flames, dust, and tin littering the floor, a heroic plant worker named Osborne Bradley, alongside three other site EMTs, rushed into the danger zone to aid workers trapped in the control room just 25 feet from the scorching 3800-degree furnace on fire. Bradley recalled the moment trouble loomed, saying, "I looked up. I saw dark smoke."

Two EMTs carried out one worker, Stevie Nichols, while Bradley spotted another colleague, Jorge Medina. With the help of another plant worker named Brian Bowling, Bradley carried Medina out of the plant to receive immediate medical treatment. Succumbing to burns that covered his body as a result of the explosion, Nichols, aged 59, was pronounced dead at 6:45 pm. Medina, aged 56, faced a similar fate, passing away the following morning due to burns covering over 90% of his body, as revealed by his autopsy.



Charred remains and ash-covered interior of Carbide Industries, [U.S. Chemical Safety Board](#)

A second explosion occurred some two hours after the initial explosion. No one suffered injuries in this blast. The petrochemical plant, which manufactures calcium carbide—the source of the initial blast—experienced the second explosion because, according to the company's official statement, **"one of three transformers that contained mineral oil above the original blast caught fire."**

The fire burning from the initial explosion burned for two more days and was deemed too intense for firefighters to extinguish. Two days after the explosion, Kentucky's Environmental Protection Agency office announced that they would investigate any potential danger from the small fires still burning inside the Carbide Industry's plant in Rubbertown.



Watch [Raw Aerials: Explosion At Carbide Industries](#)

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Residents near the plant voiced outrage at the failure of the city's notification system, MetroSafe, that was designed to notify residents of these emergencies. "We heard explosions in our house and it shook our homes, windows, and then afterwards we ran outside and saw the clouds of black smoke," one resident reported. "But we got a lot of different information from several different officers to tell us to go in[side]. Some tell us we were gonna be evacuated."

The most effective communication for residents was REACT member Charles Pope, who ran through Chickasaw Park and its surrounding streets to warn people about the explosion.

REACT member Eboni Neal Cochran vividly recalls the loud explosion followed by unfamiliar sirens, prompting her to call 911 for help. Cochran encountered a dismissive response from the operator, which left her feeling disregarded and ignored. Despite persistent efforts to obtain information, the operator remained unhelpful, claiming they did not know about any issue at the plant. Despite explaining that she saw emergency responders at the plant, the operator insisted that Cochran end the phone call.

After the event, residents discovered that emergency responders and industry workers were using two different radio channels to communicate, which led to more chaos and confusion.



Two days after the explosion, Brian Tucker of Insider Louisville published an eye-opening piece detailing some of the factors leading up to the explosion. Tucker's investigation included insights from individuals with direct knowledge of the March 21, 2011, incident, shedding light on troubling aspects of Carbide Industries' operations.

One former employee, speaking anonymously, described the Carbide plant as a "ticking time bomb," and revealed two critical insights into the company's decisions regarding human life and safety. First, plans to overhaul the furnace were reportedly delayed, with the employee emphasizing that this delay was unjustifiable. Second, smaller explosions at the plant were frequent and not disclosed to the public, indicating a pattern of negligence. Another insider characterized Carbide as a **"filthy, nasty place to work."**

Tucker further criticized the local media for relying on vague press releases and criticized Plant Manager John Gant and Louisville Metro Emergency Management Director Doug Hamilton for their perceived inadequacies in handling the explosion's aftermath.



Six weeks after the Carbide explosion, Tucker's follow-up article revealed a disturbing **lack of public information regarding the disaster**. Their thorough analysis of state records uncovered a troubling trend regarding workplace safety at Carbide Industries. The investigation revealed a stark absence of records documenting workplace injuries after March 2007, despite indications of widespread problems at the plant between 2005 and 2007.

In response to the discrepancies, the Kentucky Labor Cabinet general council commented that there were likely no reported accidents or work safety violations post-March 2007, a statement that raised eyebrows given the historical safety issues at the plant. This statement was further challenged by media reports in 2009 detailing a fire at the plant, resulting in injuries to two Louisville firefighters.

The investigation underscored a concerning lack of oversight, as an industrial site dealing with hazardous materials went uninspected for more than four years until the tragic events of March 21, 2011. Insider sources within the plant, preferring anonymity for fear of reprisal, revealed a sentiment that obstacles hindering the plant's rebuilding might dissuade Carbide Industries executives from taking action, primarily due to cost concerns.

Eventually, Carbide Industries asked for \$6.5 million in tax incentives to rebuild its Rubbertown plant following the fatal explosion and was granted the exception. This decision meant that taxpayers would have to shoulder some of the cost of Carbide's actions, or lack thereof.

Granting substantial tax incentives reinforced a **culture of negligence and non-compliance** with safety standards. The state's justification for granting these incentives under the Kentucky Industrial Revitalization Act (KIRA) also raised ethical concerns, as it appeared to reward Carbide Industries' failure to prioritize safety and proper maintenance practices.

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In 2013, nearly two full years following the explosion, a Draft final report from the U.S. Chemical Safety Board (CSB) shed light on the root cause of the 2011 explosion. The report revealed that Carbide Industries' **failure to investigate and properly maintain equipment** involved in previous incidents was the primary factor behind the explosion. CSB Chairperson Rafael Moure-Eraso expressed grave concern, stating, "Carbide displayed a chronic lack of commitment to figuring out what was going wrong, ignoring all the warning signs, even as its workers were exposed to a potential massive explosion just a few feet away from their control room."



Moure-Eraso further emphasized that the company had fostered a culture of **"normalization of deviance,"** wherein abnormal and often unsafe events became acceptable in daily operations. This trend contributed to a disregard for safety protocols and a failure to address critical issues before they escalated into disasters. The CSB's report exposed how the company could have prevented the explosion had it proactively implemented elements of a robust safety management plan, underscoring the importance of proactive safety measures in preventing such catastrophic incidents.

Today, what can we learn from this event? First, the Carbide explosion underscores the unreliability of corporations' efforts regarding the safety and well-being of residents. The flaws identified in the city-wide notification system further reveal dysfunction that poses significant risks to residents' safety.

Second, the explosion points to workplace issues within these industrial facilities. The CSB report highlights that the "normalization of deviance" pervades Rubbertown companies where similar cases have been reported and indicate a common trend. To put it simply, **profit is prioritized over people**.

Finally, this explosion exposes the pitfalls of regulators relying on self-reporting and internal investigations by offending companies. **Increased transparency and accountability in corporate practices are needed**—and greatly needed, even 13 years later.