

A Tale of Two Cities: Tragic Aftermath of the Explosion at Fertilizer Company in West, Texas

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The April 15 bombings in Boston continue to dominate the American media. The twin blasts near the finish line of the city's annual marathon killed three people and wounded over 170 more, many seriously.

But a more deadly and destructive explosion, the April 17 eruption of the West Fertilizer Company plant in the rural town of West, Texas, has virtually dropped out of the news. That event, to all appearances an industrial accident waiting to happen, killed 14 people and wounded 200, some critically. It virtually leveled a five-block residential area abutting the plant, flattening over 50 homes, gutting an apartment building and seriously damaging a middle school and nursing home.

The pretext for the de facto state of siege imposed on the Boston metropolitan area—an unprecedented military-police lockdown of a US city—was the supposed need to protect the population. But rather than question the mobilization of thousands of troops and police and deployment of armored cars and Blackhawk helicopters—all to hunt down one 19-year-old youth—the media did, and continues to do, all it could to whip up fear and glorify an exercise in police state rule, including cheering on the warrantless and illegal house-to-house searches.

The Boston Marathon bombing was a criminal act and those responsible should be prosecuted and brought to justice. But there is no such concern within the political and media establishment for bringing to justice those responsible for the explosion that ripped through West, Texas. That tragedy is already being treated as just another industrial accident in a country where nearly 4 million workers are injured on the job each year and over 4,600 died from work-related injuries in 2011.

The White House announced Tuesday that Obama will speak at a memorial service for the victims of the fertilizer plant explosion to be held Thursday at Baylor University in nearby Waco, Texas. The timing is convenient, since the president was already scheduled to hold a fundraiser in Dallas Wednesday evening and attend the dedication ceremony for George W. Bush's library in Dallas on Thursday.

The indifference of the media and politicians toward the killing and maiming of workers by companies that ignore safety and health regulations, and government agencies that lack both the resources and the desire to enforce them, highlights the fraud of their supposed concern for the safety of the people of Boston.

The same day Obama makes his appearance at Baylor to shed crocodile tears for the

victims of the West, Texas factory explosion, he will honor a man, his predecessor in the White House, who gutted federal safety and health agencies and instituted a policy of “voluntary self-compliance,” i.e., an open invitation for owners to ignore regulations, whatever the cost in the lives and limbs of their employees.

Obama himself has continued the decades-long bipartisan policy of undermining occupational health and safety enforcement in the interests of corporate profit making. His new budget calls for a cut in compliance assistance programs carried out by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Even more crippling, the agency’s budget is being slashed by 8 percent as a result of the sequester cuts signed into law by Obama in March.

OSHA and other federal agencies, such as the Chemical Safety Board, are hopelessly undermanned. Between OSHA and state agencies, there are only 2,200 inspectors responsible for enforcing the safety of 130 million US workers. In 1977, OSHA had 37 inspectors for every million workers. Today it has only 22, a reduction of more than 40 percent. As a result, OSHA has all but abandoned regular inspections of work sites.

Potential time bombs such as the West Fertilizer plant routinely breach safety rules and are either not inspected or occasionally cited and given token fines. The sprawling fertilizer storage and retail facility holds 540,000 pounds of explosive ammonium nitrate, the material used by Timothy McVeigh to bomb the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995. That is 1,350 times the amount that is supposed to trigger oversight by the Department of Homeland Security. The plant also stores 110,000 pounds of volatile anhydrous ammonia.

Over the past decade, it has been fined for safety violations and operating without a permit. It has no automatic shutoff system, no firewalls and no emergency management plans. The last time OSHA inspected the plant was in 1985, when the agency found “serious violations” and fined the owners \$30.

There are some 6,000 such fertilizer retail centers nationwide, according to the Fertilizer Institute, a trade association.

There are both economic and political reasons for the vast difference between the attitude of the state and the media to the events in Boston and the events in West, Texas. Economically, the state is dedicated to protecting private ownership and control of industry and opposing any measures that infringe on the “right” of owners to dictate working conditions and maximize profits.

Politically, the ruling class is pursuing an agenda in Boston of sowing fear and anxiety so as to disorient the public, divert attention from its attack on working class living standards, and justify its policy of militarism and war, carried out under cover of the “war on terror.”

It is haunted by fear of growing social discontent and the precarious state of global financial markets, which could trigger another financial crash and the eruption of mass social struggles. It is in preparation for such events that it is planning dictatorial forms of rule, such as those tested out last week in Boston.

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