

Brother: Work On Conn. Plant Had 'Substandard' Safety

John Christoffersen, Associated Press Writer

NEW HAVEN, Conn. (AP) — The brother of one of five workers killed in an explosion at a power plant under construction says his brother called the project "screwed up," and a worker on the job the day before the explosion says safety on the job was "substandard."

The concerns about pressure to get the job done and safety standards at the Kleen Energy Systems plant in Middletown were raised in interviews with The Associated Press on Wednesday, and add to a growing number of questions about work conditions at the site.

Carl Crabb told the AP that his brother, Ron, and other workers evacuated the building after they smelled gas. He said they made it outside the building, but Ron was killed.

"Ron wasn't too happy the way this job was going," Carl Crabb said. "They had a lot of problems. I know he said the job was really screwed up."

Crabb, who did not cite specifics, said his brother and others felt pressure to get the job done and wished he hadn't taken the assignment.

"They felt they were slipping further behind — lot of tension on the job," he said.

Tom Alferi, 58, a steamfitter who worked on the plant as recently as the day before the explosion, said electrical and welding cords were strewn all over the site.

"It was a very messy place," Alferi said. "They didn't hire enough laborers. The safety on the job was substandard."

Alferi said there was pressure in recent weeks to get the job done, but he described it as normal for that kind of job. He said his immediate concern was for those who lost friends and loved ones.

The son of another worker killed said Tuesday his father was working more than 80 hours per week and felt pressure to finish. Robert Reardon, an attorney for a worker injured in the blast, also said workers were spending seven days a week on the project.

"There's no doubt my client felt he was being rushed in his job," Reardon said Wednesday. "The word was coming down from above, so to speak, that they had to work longer hours and they had to work on Sundays because they were behind. He made it clear to me the pressure was on to get the job done and it was daily."

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Paul Gaskins, who was working on a steam turbine at the time of the explosion, said Tuesday that he and his colleagues worked 12 to 13 hours every day, but said they were not rushed.

The powerful explosion blew apart large swaths of the nearly completed 620-megawatt Kleen Energy Systems plant as workers for O&G purged a gas line Sunday morning. The cause is being investigated, and authorities launched a criminal investigation Monday, saying they couldn't rule out negligence.

O&G Industries said in a statement Wednesday that while it is the general contractor on the project and a minority shareholder in the plant's ownership, the company did not perform the majority of specialized work, including mechanical, electric and piping.

Subcontractors were "required to have and adhere to their own safety plan, as well as having a safety officer on site," according to the statement.

O&G said safety personnel regularly inspected the site. An O&G spokesman said he could not comment on the complaints from some workers and their families.

John Chavez, a public affairs officer for OSHA, said Wednesday he is not aware of any federal laws or regulations that would limit the number of hours an employer can require their employee to work.

Daniel Horowitz, a spokesman for the U.S. Chemical Safety Board, which investigates chemical disasters, said it was too early to tell whether fatigue is an issue because investigators have only done a handful of interviews due to a dispute with local authorities over whether they can have access to the site and investigation. But he said fatigue and performance issues are something the agency would typically look at.

OSHA records show O&G Industries had one violation on the site after a July 2009 inspection, but it was minor and the company settled it by paying a \$1,000 fine.

Telephone messages were left Wednesday for union officials were not returned.

Middletown Deputy Fire Marshal Al Santostefano told AP that officials are close to identifying the point of origin for Sunday's explosion at Kleen Energy Systems, and that will help them determine the cause.

Santostefano says investigators wrapped up work site around 11:30 p.m. Tuesday because of the winter storm, plan to return Thursday and might know the cause by Friday.

Also Wednesday, Don Holmstrom, the lead investigator for the U.S. Chemical Safety Board, said he was concerned that employees of O&G have had unfettered access to the site and could compromise probes into the deadly blast.

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He said evidence, including a camera and a combustible gas detector, has been removed.

Santostefano said O&G workers do not have access to the interior of the building or the site where they feel the blast might have come from.

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Associated Press Writer Susan Haigh contributed to this story.

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