

Pentagon profits, Tennessee funerals: 16 workers die feeding the war machine

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Vigil in Centerville, Tennessee, honoring the victims of a blast at an AES

explosives plant on Oct. 10.

Sixteen workers died in an explosion at Accurate Energetic Systems in rural Tennessee.

AES supplies explosives to the U.S. military and major contractors. Demand for munitions is rising across the Pentagon's supply chain.

Routine OSHA inspections are largely suspended during the shutdown. AES previously faced citations for RDX (an explosive with neurotoxic dust) exposure at the plant.

This is the domestic face of permanent war. More missiles, less oversight, dead workers. Factories run at wartime tempo. Working-class communities pay with their lives.

The blast, not a glitch

A pre-dawn explosion leveled an AES production building near Bucksport, rattling homes miles away as Sheriff Chris Davis called the scene “devastating,” with recovery hinging on days-long, DNA-based identifications amid dangerous debris and unexploded ordnance.

Authorities have now identified all 16 victims, closing one chapter of uncertainty for a town where nearly everyone knows someone who worked behind those blast walls. The cause remains under investigation by federal and state agencies, but the pattern — production pressure outrunning protection — is already legible.

War economy squeeze

AES manufactures and tests high-energy materials for the Army and major contractors, tying a 1,300-acre plant and its workers directly to the Pentagon's

procurement cycle as orders surge and schedules tighten.

Lockheed Martin and its peers are accelerating weapons production — ramping up output of missiles, launchers, and interceptors. They're expanding automation and factory floors to “deliver more, faster,” driving a chain reaction through their suppliers, especially smaller and more vulnerable shops like AES.

Precision Strike Missile output alone is being pushed to 400 units per year, a symbol of an industry racing to boost firepower across everything from artillery rockets to anti-ship weapons.

Boeing has locked in \$2.7 billion in contracts to build more than 3,000 PAC-3 seekers — the guidance systems that let Patriot missiles find and destroy incoming targets. Production will reach up to 750 units a year through 2030, cementing Boeing's position as a key subcontractor to Lockheed Martin and the U.S. Army.

Lockheed, the Patriot program's prime contractor, separately won a \$9.8 billion Army deal in September for PAC-3 MSE interceptors. Together, the awards mark a full-scale production ramp from top contractors to component suppliers across the missile industry.

The [New York Times headline](#) on Oct. 13 declared: “Factory towns revive as defense tech makers arrive.”:

“In January, Anduril, an artificial-intelligence-backed weapons manufacturer, announced that it was building a \$1 billion factory in Ohio to make drones and other A.I.-enabled weapons. It has since said it also plans to open factories in Rhode Island and Mississippi.

“Regent, a shipbuilding start-up, is constructing a factory in Rhode Island to make electric sea gliders for military purposes. And UXV Technologies, a Danish drone and robotics company, opened a manufacturing facility in Pennsylvania last year.”

The military-industrial monopolies tie this surge directly to active wars and military buildups in Ukraine, West Asia (including Palestine and Iran), and the Indo-Pacific, where Washington is preparing for war on China. Rising conflict is being turned into production orders — and subcontractors are under intense pressure to deliver on time.

In plants that handle missile explosive components like Tennessee's AES, workers bear the brunt of this push, as the war economy turns public funding into private backlogs and rising shop-floor risk.

Oversight on ice

Since Oct. 1, the government shutdown has sidelined most federal workplace safety programs. Routine inspections are halted, and enforcement is on hold — just when high-risk industries need the closest oversight.

This isn't just a delay in investigating accidents; it increases the danger in real time. Workers handling explosive materials now face greater risk without regular audits or the authority to stop unsafe work. With inspectors off the job, "run harder" becomes the unspoken rule on the factory floor.

Years before the explosion, Tennessee inspectors found AES workers suffering seizures and nervous system damage from exposure to RDX, a powerful explosive compound. Tests detected explosive residue on their skin — and even in the break room — showing that toxic exposure had spread into supposedly safe areas.

Inspectors labeled the violations "serious," but AES settled the cases with minor fixes and light penalties. The deeper hazards stayed in place.

The Pentagon pipeline

Between 2020 and 2024, private companies took in about \$2.4 trillion in Pentagon

contracts. The top five defense giants alone captured \$771 billion — government money funneled through corporate pipelines, while the real danger lands on the factory floor, where explosives are poured, pressed, and packed.

Missile and launcher orders are surging, and backlogs are booming. But safety investment isn't keeping pace. The subcontractors who turn contracts into weapons bear the risk. As the arsenal speeds up, the danger moves from the battlefield to the workshop.

Defense work is now fused with cloud computing and AI. Tech giants have landed multi-billion-dollar military contracts, wiring battlefield systems into the same digital networks that power everyday life. Silicon Valley is fully woven into the war machine.

Engineers who could be designing trains, housing, or renewable energy are instead building targeting software and missile guidance systems — because that's where the guaranteed money is. Entire workforces and regions are being reshaped around permanent, low-level war instead of social rebuilding.

Sixteen dead, little said

Sixteen workers were killed in the mass detonation at AES. The blast tore through a plant that fed the U.S. war machine — and through families who now hold vigils few national outlets cover.

Media coverage faded within days. When production outruns protection, tragedy becomes routine. The permanent war economy treats domestic risk as the cost of global power. The workers who die in these plants are casualties of that system, even if they never leave U.S. soil.

