

Eight workers burned in power plant fire get sizeable settlement

On behalf of Johnston, Moore & Thompson

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"I just remember the vivid images of when I was burned, when I looked at myself in the ambulance," said 24-year-old Alex T. of the [industrial accident](#) two years ago that left him with deep burns over 65 percent of his body.

"There's not a day that goes by when I don't think about what happened. And there's nothing that can remove those images, those vivid images from my mind."

Industrial workers survive harrowing coal dust explosion but left with life-changing burn injuries

On February 3, 2009, contractors were setting up scaffolding inside a silo at the We Energies power plant in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, just south of Milwaukee. The silo was used to collect coal dust and store it for eventual burning, and it was in need of repairs.

The flammable coal dust was supposed to have been removed before the repairs began. It was not. The construction workers were not warned of any hazardous conditions inside the building.

As the contractors worked, unaware of the danger, airborne coal dust landed on a boiler light, sparking an enormous explosion. The force of the explosion slammed several workers against a wall, and an intense fireball engulfed at least six workers in flame.

Foreman Jeff R. was up on the scaffolding, so he was only caught by part of the explosion. His arm caught fire so, as he was trained to do, he dropped and rolled to extinguish the flames.

He didn't realize he was rolling in flammable coal dust, which only spread the fire. A colleague saved him by throwing him into a snow bank.

Alex T. was also saved by being thrown into a snow bank. He was so badly burned that his own father, who was standing nearby, didn't recognize him.

Alex's face, ear, hands and entire lower body were horribly burned. He was forced to endure 17 surgeries and has had dozens of skin grafts taken from his arms and upper torso to repair his legs. He had tattoos on his biceps and upper body, and some of them are now on his lower legs.

"That bothers me," he said quietly at a press conference. "A lot."

Two years after the ghastly explosion, both Alex and Jeff say their skin is simultaneously so sensitive that they can't tolerate temperature extremes and so numb in places that they can only feel deep pressure. Alex does not know if he will ever again be able to feel a caress.

Injured workers settle with two companies for \$16 million

Alex and Jeff were among eight workers who sued Wisconsin Electric Power Co., which owns the power plant, and U.S. Fire Protection Inc., the contractor overseeing the silo repairs. Although the [explosion](#) occurred during the course of the workers' employment, the men were able to sue the two companies in addition to making workers' compensation claims. This is because the two companies the men say were negligent were not their employers.

According to a spokesperson, Wisconsin Electric denies any responsibility for the industrial accident, and reporters were not able to obtain a comment from U.S. Fire Protection. Although they are settling the case for \$16 million to be divided up among the injured men, Wisconsin Electric says that the issue of who was responsible will be decided among the defendants and their insurance companies.

Trevino was one of eight people who sued the power plant and a contracting firm. The workers and the defendants announced a \$16 million settlement on Thursday, the two-year anniversary of the explosion.

"It's not about the money," Alex T. told The Associated Press. To demonstrate, the young man -- only 22 at the time of the explosion -- held up his scarred hands.

"This body, I know it's not me. My appearance, these scars, I know this is not me. There's no amount of money that can ever change that."

Source: Associated Press, "[8 reach \\$16M settlement in Wis. utility explosion](#)," Dinesh Ramde, February 3, 2011