Oracle workers had just minutes to escape fire
Subsequent explosion blew a 40-foot wide hole in roof of plant

By Patrick Wilson
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Workers' quick actions during a fire and explosion at a packaging plant on Monday saved their lives, the fire marshal said yesterday.

"It was a true miracle that nobody was injured," said Robert Owens, Winston-Salem's fire marshal. "The folks there took the original fire seriously and they evacuated, and that was what helped not have any fatalities, really. This was a massive explosion."

The workers had just minutes to get out of the section of the Oracle Metals Operations plant that caught fire at 9:11 a.m.

The first Winston-Salem firefighters arrived at 9:14. Before they got there, the fire had spread to another room and caused an explosion that caused the
The explosion left a hole in the roof about 40 feet in diameter.

Sixty employees were working in the plant when the fire started, the company said.

The fire marshal's office has not determined the cause of the explosion but has determined it to be accidental.

The plant is at 1300 Cunningham Ave., off Vargrave Street. About 25 percent of the building was damaged, Owens said.

The fire started at a milling machine, where workers were making aluminum foil that the company sells to pharmaceutical, health-care and food companies.

The material is fed through the machine to be pressed. Workers use oil to keep the material cool. The oil ignited, starting the fire, Owens said.

A fire-suppression system on the machine put it out, but not before it had spread into an overhead duct system, he said.

The fire then spread into a room where the aluminum foil is bailed for recycling, where the explosion occurred.

Fire investigators say that they have an idea of what caused the explosion.

"It was all accidental," Owens said. "However, we are trying to rule out a couple more things before we actually make the call on what triggered that explosion."

The fire department is still working with the company to put a dollar figure on the amount of damage, Owens said.

Oracle Packaging also has a plant on Polo Road in Winston-Salem and has plants in Wilmington and other states.

The roughly 150 employees at the Cunningham Avenue plant are getting paid time off while the company figures out repairs said Chris Payne, the director of sales and marketing for Oracle Packaging.
Assessments of the building and interviews with employees will continue through this week, he said.

The company issued a statement Monday thanking the fire department and its own fire brigade for containing the fire.

"It's been a very difficult situation," Payne said yesterday.

"We're extremely pleased that nobody was injured, and we're proud of our fire brigade - our internal fire brigade - and all of our employees in adhering to safety policies and doing the right thing."

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