

Documents shed light on fatal explosion

Safety inspections slashed at Australian gas plant

Will Marshall
13 October 1998

Fresh revelations have confirmed concerns expressed by gas industry workers about the deterioration of safety and maintenance conditions at the Australian gas plant that exploded last month, killing two workers and halting energy supplies across the state of Victoria.

It has now emerged that the number of government safety inspections at the plant had dropped from an average of 120 a year to 18 a year since 1996. State government amendments to the Occupational Health and Safety Act led directly to the 80 percent cut in inspections by the Victorian WorkCover Authority (VWA).

These leaked facts appear to lie behind last Friday's police raids on VWA offices in the state capital Melbourne and in two towns--Morwell and Traralgon--in the Latrobe Valley region near where the Esso natural gas plant is located. Police, acting on orders from the state coroner, Graeme Johnstone, seized files relating to Esso's safety performance. Earlier, VWA inspectors and former inspectors had suggested that records of safety inspections had gone missing, resulting in a Labor Party spokesman raising concerns in state parliament.

The police raids were organised as it became obvious that the two-week gas supply crisis, which paralysed much of the state in the wake of the September 25 blast, is far from over. Most gas services have now resumed but the state Liberal Party government of Premier Jeff Kennett has banned gas heating indefinitely, causing severe discomfort, and admitted that further shortages may occur next winter.

As a result of the last month's blast, two workers are already dead and eight injured. Over a million households were deprived of hot water, cooking

facilities and heating for two weeks. Thousands of small businesses had to shut their doors and perhaps as many as 200,000 workers were stood down because major industrial plants could not operate.

Then last Wednesday some 11,000 homes, already without gas, experienced an electricity blackout due to a surge in power usage in cold conditions. According to the weather bureau, such conditions can be expected, on average, five more times before the end of the year.

Even more dangerously, explosions injured scores of people when they attempted to reconnect their gas services by following the instructions in a government pamphlet. The government and Esso, a subsidiary of Exxon, the American giant, refused to organise plumbers and gasfitters to reconnect services safely, but the government was finally forced to do so for up to 100,000 users who requested help.

Among the VWA files seized by police are reports from VWA inspectors, who were alarmed by the reduction in the number of inspections in recent years. The VWA publicly claimed it had carried out nearly 1,000 inspections of the Esso plant in the last 10 years -- but in reality it had conducted only 37 inspections in the last two years.

Moreover, the inspectors no longer examine plant machinery and safety, but merely make what are known as Safetymap checks, designed to improve the overall performance of the workplace. By one report, the last inspection at the Esso plant, a highly dangerous and complex infrastructure with three interconnected gas-processing units, lasted only 100 minutes.

Apart from Esso, a number of companies have been involved in accidents causing serious injury and death to workers shortly after such Safetymap checks. Major

companies such as Esso now operate as self-regulators and 'self-insurers' under the Health and Safety Act, responsible for their own safety and maintenance reviews. In 1995 the Kennett government also revoked legislation that forced plants with high-pressure pipes and dangerous chemicals to have checks made by a government agency. These changes ensure that profit and cost-cutting considerations prevail over health and safety.

As part of this regime, the VWA itself has been downsized. Many of its inspectors have taken departure packages and the VWA has begun to drive out those remaining inspectors who are unable to adapt themselves to the new environment. A three-member panel has been set up with the aim of removing over 60 inspectors.

The seized documents reportedly show that inspectors were not asked to review safety at the Esso plant after a pipeline ice plug interrupted gas supplies for three days in June. Instead, Esso was permitted to carry out an internal report, which Esso and the government have refused to release. VWA inspectors were excluded from the review, even though the VWA admits to having had to investigate two other incidents at the Esso plant in the previous 12 months.

The June ice blockage is now regarded as a possible precursor to the September 25 explosion and shutdown. Cuts to manning levels seem to have played a role in both. The ice plug occurred in pipes connecting the Esso plant to offshore oil platforms owned by Esso and its partner, BHP. It appears that a lack of an anti-freezing agent in the pipes was responsible. Esso no longer permanently mans the offshore plants. When an alarm went off, the company wrongly assumed that it was not a genuine alert.

Serious accidents have occurred on the offshore platforms over the last decade--in 1968, 1970, 1987 and 1989--including a near disaster on one of the offshore platforms.

In 1970 a leaking valve caught fire and the flames were visible 70 kilometres away. Seven years later an engineer was severely burnt on the Kingfisher Platform and drowned when he threw himself in the ocean to put out the flames. His assistant was seriously injured. Despite the death, Esso was fined just \$15, 000 for breaches of safety regulations.

Another Esso worker died at Geelong, also in

Victoria, in 1988. Working inside a vertical Liquid Petroleum Gas storage tank, he was exposed to concentrated nitrogen. Esso was again fined a small amount for breaching several safety regulations.

A potentially disastrous fire erupted on a platform in 1989. The then assistant coroner who investigated the incident, Graeme Johnstone, stated that the fire had the potential to emulate the Piper Alpha disaster where 170 lives were lost in the North Sea oilfields. However, Esso was merely fined for safety breaches.

Labor Party spokesman Theo Theophanous told state parliament last week that the latest explosion may have ignited after a seal had been leaking gas for hours, with workers attempting to repair it. Bolts used to hold down the cover on the vessel that caused the leak cost approximately \$400 each and should have been replaced more regularly.

While the state Labor opposition now decries Esso's safety breaches, it was in power during the late 1980s when Esso's accidents involving deaths and injuries went virtually unpunished. Likewise, union leaders have been quick to assert that they knew a major accident was likely about to occur, but for the last decade and more they have signed various agreements with Esso and other companies, accepting such conditions.

See Also:

Australian gas disaster raises many questions
[1 October 1998]



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact