

Former Esso plant worker speaks out

"It was only a matter of time before this happened"

Will Marshall
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A former Esso plant worker, still living in Sale, Victoria, has given the World Socialist Web Site vital information about the cuts to jobs and maintenance in the now-damaged plant. He must remain anonymous for fear of reprisal from the company for which he now works.

The worker began by confirming the comments of other workers that the Esso plant had been 'an accident waiting to happen'.

'Most people who work with Esso have said that it is a matter of time before there is a major occurrence. We have reached that point with the explosion. It is an absolute tragedy. I know most of the people in the plant.

'The people immediately near the explosion don't want to return to work in the plant. Esso is de-manning the offshore platforms to provide a workforce for the plant. Yet in many ways, the safety conditions offshore are worse than those in the plant.'

He went to describe the dangerous situation in which the explosion occurred.

'I think there was a leak, which had been occurring for some time. They attempted to fix it with a heat treatment, but this didn't work. A gas cloud formed some distance from the leak and came into contact with perhaps a fire heater. This would have caused the first explosion.

'To my knowledge, one of the blokes killed had a radio with him, and was trying to fix up the situation. The reason the LPG bullets (two giant Liquid Petroleum Gas tanks) didn't explode, was because there is an inbuilt system that douses them with water in case of fire. If a fire gets completely out of control, then the LPG would still heat up and it would blow.'

He said Esso had drastically reduced both the production and maintenance workforces in the plant.

'As far as maintenance is concerned there has been a systematic restructuring since the late '80s. If you look at the plant from an operational view, they have cut numbers dramatically. In the past there were 19-20 production workers on a shift, four of whom were experienced supervisors. It's now down to 13 on a shift, with one experienced supervisor. The experienced workers have been gotten out with redundancies, because their wages cost more.

'Esso brought in a production manager in 1996 from America. His name was Marty Maffey. His job was to slash and burn and cut costs everywhere. It was ruthless to the point that not only did workers leave, but a whole number of engineering managers and staff went as well. The eighth floor of Esso became known as 'the Departure Lounge' because so many people left. I have no doubt that a lot of people blame the explosion on what has taken place with downsizing.'

He explained the new maintenance system and the cold, hard profit calculations behind it.

'It is not only the cuts in numbers, but a different strategy as well. It used to be termed preventative maintenance; now it is called breakdown maintenance. It is worked out with a matrix: the company projects what the consequence will be if a delay occurs with maintenance of a particular piece of equipment. If a part breaks down at a certain time, it may not be fixed until the maintenance crew returns. The matrix is really an estimation that categorises the impact any damage to equipment will have, in terms of production and health and safety.

'When this was brought in, maintenance overtime was

cut to zero, and over a period of time, Esso has outsourced a large part of maintenance to Skilled Engineering and other companies. Esso cut the working conditions to such a point that the workers would accept the contracting out of maintenance. They had cut back so far that the jobs just weren't getting done.

'The same thing has gone on with the offshore rigs. It started basically in 1990. Again, in the past, offshore, you had a full maintenance crew for each platform. Through continual retirements and redundancies, there is now a centralised maintenance crew who go wherever they are called. The end result is a huge backlog. As well as that, there is a loss of base knowledge and continuity.'



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