

Workers comment on inquiry into Australian gas explosion

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to two workers from the Esso gas plant at Longford in Australia after a recent Royal Commission held the company responsible for a gas explosion at the plant in September 1998, which claimed the lives of two workers, injured another eight and cut gas supplies to the state of Victoria for two weeks. Esso now faces a class legal action with damages of \$A1 billion on behalf of domestic gas users and private businesses.

Jim Ward, who had worked for Esso for 19 years, was a panel operator at the time of the explosion. The company attempted to pin the blame for the explosion on Ward, saying that he should have been aware of the dangers inherent in the situation and that his evidence was “evasive”. The Royal Commission, however, refuted Esso's version, saying that the oil giant was responsible for the disaster due primarily to the lack of training given to its employees.

Asked how he felt about the Royal Commission findings, Ward said: “Workers were happy, but no-one is over the moon. The atmosphere is reserved. Esso is a vindictive company; they lose battles, but win wars. They will throw in every financial resource to protect themselves. In terms of the coming class action, it would be a drop in the ocean for them to pay out. But they are prepared to fight it tooth and nail.

“The findings are basically what I thought would occur. Esso has been found at fault. But as for the recommendations, Esso will ignore them. They will seek legal avenues; they will maintain their stance that it was 'operator error' that caused the explosion. They will maintain that their training was adequate.

“I had a suspicion from the start that they were going to blame me. If you look at the Exxon Valdez case, Esso wasn't willing to take any responsibility for what happened. They got out of owning ships so that they would not take any liability. They will still seek any

legal avenue to protect themselves.

“The workforce at Longford are in a dilemma. If they had a choice, they wouldn't work there, but they're forced to. They don't have transferable skills, and they have commitments to their families. It is impossible to walk away.”

Speaking about Heath Brew, one of the injured workers, Ward said: “Heath is one of the most incredible individuals. He suffered injuries to his hand, face, ear, and will have to have at least 20 corrective operations. But he just keeps going. Esso has the responsibility to employ him”.

When asked about his testimony before the commission, Ward commented: “It was harrowing. If anything didn't match up with what you'd said before, they would go in like sharks. Before I testified, a lot of the evidence from other operators had been obtained by the Esso legal team. They phrased the question in a certain way: ‘If you were in such a situation would you take action to stop this?’ And of course the operators would say ‘yes’.

“When I was cross-examined, I had to be brutally honest. If I didn't know something, or if I hadn't been trained for something, I said so. I think it opened the floodgates—after I testified other people admitted what they did/didn't know. I did this because I felt we had to get the truth.

“The safety at Esso is driven from the top down rather than from the ground up. They present a proposal, then we make suggestions, but our suggestions have to fit in with their agenda. We say that we need more manpower, but they say it's too costly. All the charts and paperwork look magnificent, but there is perception and reality. The reality was different from what they were saying. Instead of two tradesmen to a job, you might get one”.

WSWS also spoke to Ronald Rawson, who had

worked for Esso since 1968 and was the area-operator at the time of the explosion. He explained that Esso had removed engineers from Longford as part of its restructuring which had had an impact on maintenance at the plant and on safety.

“Five or six years ago we had permanent engineers at the site. If you had a problem running a section of the plant you could give them a buzz and they would come and sort it out. They would come and wander around the plant with you. There were seven engineers in the main office. I believe if they had been there on 25 September we could have controlled the situation.

“But due to the cut-backs, they weren't. Esso said they couldn't afford them. We used to have more supervisors too. They have got rid of them as well. They have gone down from four supervisors on a shift to one, while maintenance has been cut to the bone. I think in a way with the enterprise deals [agreements between the unions and Esso], that we sold ourselves out. I'm sure the union is having second thoughts about that.

“The fact that Esso didn't carry out a Haz-Op (Hazard Operability Study), didn't surprise me. Lots of things were put off all the time. There was a lot of frustration for the operators, because we couldn't get the job done.”

Rawson criticised the fact that the state government had not been apportioned any responsibility for the accident, despite the laxity of government safety regulations. There was no external government body to ensure that Esso adhered to the necessary safety requirements. “It's typical of de-regulation. The big multinationals call the tune. They say ‘we're doing this' and it is accepted. And the Kennett government has been able to clear its name prior to an election,” he said.



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