

Phillips Petroleum plant explosion: the latest in a series of deadly accidents at Houston facility

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A massive explosion and fire killed one worker and injured 71 others at Phillips Petroleum Co.'s Houston Chemical Complex Monday afternoon, March 27, in Pasadena, Texas. This was the third fatal blast in the last 11 years at the chemical complex. At least 26 workers have lost their lives in these explosions.

Thirty-two Phillips employees and 39 subcontractors were taken to area hospitals for burns, smoke inhalation, cuts from flying debris and other injuries. As of Wednesday afternoon at least two workers remained in critical condition from severe burns and six others were listed in serious condition.

Company officials say about 850 Phillips employees and 100 subcontractors work at the complex, and about 600 workers were on duty when the blast occurred.

Tim Williams, a Phillips employee, told the *Houston Chronicle*, "I was in the main shop talking to a guy, and all of a sudden there was a loud boom. It hurt my ears. There was stuff in the air, and we just took off running." J.J. Roberts, an employee of subcontractor HB Zachery, said she was working in a warehouse at the plant and saw a fireball that was a least one city block wide.

It took search crews five hours to locate the body of a missing employee in the rubble. The dead man was Rodney Gott, a 45-year-old supervisor, who barely survived an explosion at the complex in 1989 that killed 23 of his coworkers and injured another 130 employees. At the time Gott was in a building whose roof collapsed but he remained in the blazing plant to save a woman and attend to the injured.

Last October 23, Gott spoke at a memorial ceremony marking the tenth anniversary of the blast and said he had often been haunted by the thought that so many

lives had been wasted in the tragedy. Gott leaves behind a wife of 20 years, their 10-year-old son, and an adult son from a previous marriage.

Monday's explosion leveled the K-Resin section at the complex where less than a year ago, in June 1999, an explosion killed two workers and injured four others. Afterward, federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration officials fined the company \$204,000 for 13 alleged safety violations. The Phillips complex also had explosions in April 1999, when a rail car containing polypropylene blew up, and in August, when there was an explosion in the polypropylene section of the plant.

The plant produces 370 million pounds per year of styrene-butadiene copolymer (SBC), a clear, tough material used in a variety of products, including medical components, toys, candy wrap, food packaging, shrink wrap, cups and clothes hangers. K-Resin SBC, the trade name for the chemical, is made only at the Pasadena plant. Other chemicals, including polyethylene, polypropylene and neohexene, are also produced at the massive chemical complex.

The fire produced huge plumes of black smoke that spread over the heavily-industrialized Houston Shipping Channel and neighboring residential areas. Workers in neighboring plants and residents in the area were urged to remain indoors while children were kept inside school after the end of their lessons as a precaution against toxic fumes. Thirty-one schools followed "shelter in place" procedures, turning off their air conditioning and closing doors and windows.

According to the *Chronicle*, alarms sounded in the plant when the explosion occurred, but Pasadena's siren system didn't alert residents until more than 15 minutes

later. Mayor Johnny Isbell said the system had been undergoing repairs because the sirens recently had been sounding when they were not supposed to.

The fire was finally extinguished shortly before 5 p.m., and Phillips officials said their monitors found no sign that anyone outside the plant was exposed to toxic chemicals, which they claimed were consumed by the fire.

Phillips employees are represented by the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International (PACE) union, which also operates labor-management safety committees with the company. Joe Campbell, the secretary-treasurer of PACE Local 4-227 in Pasadena, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Too many people have been killed in the complex over the last 10 years. We've got people who are scared to go back in that plant because they are worried there is going to be a reoccurrence. Several are going to psychiatrists.

“This is a tragedy for the contractors who were injured Monday too. But the truth is, instead of hiring union members Phillips employs contractors who have little or no experience working in a volatile place. On any given day there are 200 to 300 contractors at the facility.

“Phillips is one of the most penny-pinching SOBs there are. They are always talking about cost savings, just like the rest of corporate America. They've been cited so many times by OSHA, but all they get is a slap on the wrist and they promise to do better next time.”

Campbell said that chemical companies are located up and down the Houston Shipping Channel, including the Crown Refinery where PACE members have been locked out for four years. There was little doubt, he said, that the area's workers and residents suffered high rates of cancer and other chemical-related ailments.

The *Chronicle* reported that after the explosion coworkers and family members gathered at nearby hospitals waiting for loved ones to arrive. One chemical worker, Danny George, whose family has a long history of working in the industry and is aware of the risks, spoke to the newspaper while awaiting word on the severity of his brother's injuries.

“Phillips has got some problems,” George said. “There's too many explosions. You've got to look at the history. Now, when you hear of an explosion, the first place you look at is Phillips.”

A press release from the company on the day of the blast noted that all of the Houston Chemical Complex had been shut down because of the explosion. “However,” the press release said, “Phillips expects to resume polyethylene and polypropylene production in the next few days.”

Phillips, the nation's eighth-largest oil company, had \$15 billion in assets at the end of 1999, and \$14 billion of revenues for the year. Last summer, under pressure from Wall Street and facing a threatened takeover by Chevron Corporation, Phillips' new CEO announced a five-year restructuring plan to sell its chemicals and refining businesses and focus on exploration and production in order to significantly increase earnings and cash flow in 2000.



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