

Spain's worst refinery fire kills six workers

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A fire at Spain's largest oil refinery last month killed six workers and seriously injured five more.

The fire was caused by an exploding gasoline tank igniting six other tanks at the Puertollano refinery south of Spain's capital Madrid. It took two days to extinguish. At one point more than 400 firefighters were involved in dousing the fire.

The refinery accounts for 19 percent of Spain's oil production and is operated by RepsolYPF, the largest oil company in Spain and one of the world's top 10 transnational oil corporations.

European oil traders have said the fire will have only a minor impact on oil markets as the company had already planned to shut down the Puertollano refinery for a month in September. A Repsol spokesman said, "The level of the stock was high at the time of the explosion. The refinery has a storage capacity of 520,000 cubic meters and a tad 8,000 were affected by the incident."

The company has said it will compensate for any loss of production at Puertollana by increasing production at its other five Spanish refineries—at Tarragona and Barcelona.

Repsol Chairman Alfonso Cortina told reporters he believed the refinery explosion and fire were the worst in Spanish history. It is clear, however, the tragedy at Puertollano was foreseeable and preventable.

The Puertollano refinery was built in the 1940s and has had six accidents in the last decade, resulting in the deaths of 14 workers. In April another Repsol refinery at La Coruña in northwest Spain exploded, injuring four people.

Firefighters recently criticised Repsol for "deficiencies" at Puertollano, although the company denies it ever received their report. An official from the UGT union declared, "This incident had uncovered shortcomings in resources, organisation and information."

In the immediate aftermath of the fire the unions called the 1,000 subcontracted workers out on strike to demand new safety measures and then agreed with Repsol to set up a joint committee to investigate the cause of the explosion.

Following a worldwide trend to privatise state-owned energy companies, the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government privatised Repsol in 1996. In 1999 Repsol bought Argentina's largest company—oil concern Yacimientos Petroliferos Fiscales (YPF)—for US\$15 billion. As a result of this transaction Repsol relied on Argentina for three-quarters of its oil supplies and two-thirds of its gas supplies. However, with Argentina's currency devaluation and threatened debt default RepsolYPF has had its credit rating cut three times since July 2001. This added free market pressure has resulted in cutbacks, outsourcing and redundancies that threaten health and safety measures.

Nothing so far has been said of compensation to the families of workers who died in the explosion.



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