

Eight killed as oil rig support vessel capsizes off coast of Scotland

Steve James
17 April 2007

Daily dangers facing workers in the cutthroat European offshore oil industry were highlighted with the tragic deaths of eight workers, including a captain and his teenage son. The eight died following the capsizing of the anchor-handling tug, the *Bourbon Dolphin*, in the North Sea off the west coast of Scotland April 12. Seven crewmembers escaped the disaster and are recovering on the nearby Shetland Isles.

The *Bourbon Dolphin*, a new vessel commissioned last October, overturned while carrying out manoeuvres with the anchors of the oil drilling rig, the *Transocean Rother*.

The rig has eight eighteen tonne anchors, which are dropped onto the seabed. Winches then tighten the anchor chains to maintain the rig in its preferred drilling location. For the rig to be moved the anchors have to be recovered from the seabed—in this case some 1,100 metres below the surface—by specially robust anchor handling tugs equipped with large deck spaces, powerful engines and winches.

Although frequently described as “routine,” these operations are complicated and dangerous, requiring a high degree of skill and patience from all involved, particularly in conditions where the vessels are pitching around in rough seas.

The *Bourbon Dolphin* appears to have successfully collected an anchor from the seafloor and was preparing to drop it to a new location. The anchor was also still attached to the oil rig and at the limit of its cable. What happened next will be the subject of investigations by the British and Norwegian authorities, but it seems that the cable from the vessel to the anchor jumped from its stops towards the vessel’s stern and moved along the side. This coincided with the vessel turning sharply.

Crewman Egil Atle Hafsaas described what happened: “I was standing outside on A-deck, watching the seas ...The boat began to list to port and then listed to port once more, but the movement was much stronger than normal ...There was an awful noise and the boat was listing more and more to port. I realised she wasn’t going to right herself.”

Hafsaas told two teenage crewmen to put on life jackets

and save themselves. All three survived by clinging to a floating container that fell off the vessel.

Of the fifteen on board, only seven were rescued alive, while three bodies have been found. It is thought that the remaining bodies are trapped in the vessel’s still floating but upturned hull or superstructure. Efforts by both divers and remote controlled vessels to locate survivors continued for some days, but have since been abandoned.

Most of those killed were Norwegian, from in and around the port and fishing town of Ålesund, and the village of Herøy near Bergen. One Dane was also killed.

Bourbon Dolphin’s owners expressed their shock at the disaster. Trond Myklebust, MD of Bourbon Norway, said, “It is absolutely incredible what has happened. We cannot understand it or believe it, because this should not happen.” Myklebust suggested, “The pressure on the chain with the currents pulled the boat over.”

Reports also indicate that the company has been trying to establish how much fuel and ballast was on the vessel, and in which tanks each was stored, suggesting that the vessel’s stability is being questioned.

It may be that the loss of the *Bourbon Dolphin* will turn out to be an unpredictable event in which an entirely unexpected set of circumstances combined to suddenly overwhelm the large, modern and well equipped vessel in relatively good weather.

But that cannot be taken for granted. The drive for profitability has put workers in UK coastal waters and surrounding exploration areas under intense pressure and produced a string of fatalities and serious accidents.

In 1980, 123 workers were killed when the Alexander Kielland oil platform capsized. In 1986 45 workers were killed when a Chinook helicopter crashed into the sea. In the same year, the Piper Alpha disaster killed 167 when an oil production platform exploded, before burning for days.

Standards improved in the aftermath of the outrage created by the Piper Alpha disaster, but there are indicators of a more recent slippage. In 2003, Shell was fined £900,000 following the deaths of two workers during a massive escape

of gas on the Brent Bravo platform, while there have been continual concerns raised over cuts in staffing levels.

In 2006, an oil rig and its 75 workers drifted for over 24 hours, and earlier the same year Shell's Tern installation was evacuated following a fire. Also in 2006, seven workers were killed when another helicopter ferrying oil workers crashed into the Irish Sea. Shortly after, a drifting cargo ship came close to hitting two gas production platforms near the Lincolnshire coast. Four workers drowned when their fishing boat *Meridian* sank off Aberdeen, while on pipeline guard duty.

The UK industry, which employs 20,000 workers, also produces a stream of serious injuries, along with suspicions that more incidents go unreported.

A recent UK Health and Safety Executive report noted that nine enforcement notices had been served following 173 written requests for investigations, and 70 checks carried out on oil platforms. The same report warned of a "general failure" to audit safety and that an increasing number of rigs, many built in the 1970s, were operating as much as 10 years beyond their planned life expectancy.

Although the *Bourbon Dolphin* was a modern vessel, it appears to have followed the traditional design for anchor handling tugs. It is indicative of general concern within the industry over the safety of anchor handling operations that another recently commissioned Bourbon vessel, the *Bourbon Orca* has, in addition to an innovative hull design to increase stability, a Safe Anchor Handling System.

It is impossible to know whether the new system would have saved the *Bourbon Dolphin*, but it is clear that maintaining staff training levels is also a continual problem in anchor handling. France-based Bourbon operates 193 oil support vessels and tugs, and employs 4,700 workers worldwide, mostly offshore.

In order to win contracts from the oil companies and oil rig operators such as Transocean, the company has to offer quicker turnaround times, faster journeys to isolated locations in the middle of some of the stormiest seas in the world. The company intends to build another 110 vessels and has opened anchor handling simulators in France and the Philippines.

But anchor handling is not an operation to be rushed. A manual on oilfield seamanship notes, "Anchor Handling is an activity which is exhilarating, boring, exhausting, terrifying and often professionally very satisfying. It can test boat handling skills to the limit and try a Master's patience beyond what the most phlegmatic of personalities should reasonably have to tolerate."

Bourbon admits, "Offshore anchor handling is a specialised operation. Due to the economic pressures always associated with drilling rig operations, anchor handling

always has an element of urgency attached to it."

The rig with whose anchor *Bourbon Dolphin* was working is drilling in the Rosebank/Lochnagar field to the west of the Shetland Isles. The field is part of an area still being explored by Chevron and Statoil, and its potential yield is not yet known. In general, however, smaller fields, particularly in the hostile and immensely challenging environments of the North Atlantic and North Sea can only be exploited in conditions of high oil prices. This in turn generates enormous pressures to bring fields online as quickly as possible.

The UK Offshore Operators' Association reported that the average cost of developing North Sea oil rose 45 percent last year, primarily due to a worldwide shortage of equipment, high steel prices and skilled staff. Costs have risen to the point where extraction costs as much as \$25 per barrel. In the Middle East, the average cost is \$2 per barrel.

Whatever the causes of the current tragedy, the dangerous market driven anarchy can only be suppressed by taking the entire industry under public ownership and workers' control. In the far-flung Northern European waters, whose oil resources stretch from the Faeroe Isles to the UK, Denmark and Norway, this is only conceivable as part of a struggle for political power by the working class of the entire continent.

The SEP election campaign in the West of Scotland offers no support whatsoever to the selfish and parochial perspective advanced by both the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Socialist Party and Solidarity, that North Sea, or for that matter North Atlantic Oil is somehow "Scotland's Oil". The SEP fights for a United Socialist States of Europe as part of a world socialist federation. Only on this basis can the energy industry be developed rationally for social need.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact