

Four workers dead in Texas crane disaster

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Four workers were killed at a Houston, Texas oil refinery on the afternoon of July 18 when a huge construction crane collapsed, pulling a second crane down with it. Seven other workers were injured in the collapse, and one worker remains hospitalized for his injuries.

According to witnesses, an evacuation alarm sounded at the refinery at around 1:30 in the afternoon. Responding to the alarm, a number of workers ran into a lunch tent designated as an evacuation rally point. The crane, breaking off at the base, toppled directly onto the tent. Workers elsewhere at the facility described being lifted off the ground by the force of the impact. Aerial photographs show the giant twisted lengths of the two cranes stretched out across the facility, as well as smashed buildings and vehicles, buckled concrete pavement, and flattened workers' tents where the cranes fell.

"It sounded like a building—sounded like a building fell. I looked back—I was on my way to evacuate the plant and I looked back and I see the arms coming down. After that, I just see a lot of black smoke," worker Stacy Davis told KPRC Local 2 News in Houston. "I stopped in my tracks. We were in shock. I was in the middle of the street. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to cry. I believe some people got killed. It was so big and so loud and I'd seen it come down."

The four men killed were employed as contract workers for Deep South Crane & Rigging, the company owning the crane. The workers have been identified as Marion "Scooter" Hubert Odom III, 41, of Highlands; John D. Henry, 33, of Dayton; Daniel "DJ" Lee Johnson, 30, of Dayton; and Rocky Dale Strength, 30, of Santa Fe, Texas.

Grant Pasek, a lineman, was seriously injured in the 45-foot fall from his bucket, where he was working at the time of the collapse. When the arms of the crane began to fall, Pasek jumped in order to survive.

At the time of the accident, around 4,500 workers, including 1,500 contract workers, were at the Houston refinery, operated by Netherlands-based chemical and refining company LyondellBasell. The facility processes high-sulfur crude oil at a rate of 270,000 barrels per day,

and is one of the largest of its kind. The refinery covers about 700 acres along the Houston Ship Channel on the outskirts of Houston. The cranes that failed had been installed as part of an overhaul of one of the facility's two crude distillation and coking units.

The taller of the two cranes that collapsed was one of the largest mobile cranes in the world, rising over 30 stories. This crane was designed to lift entire oil derricks so the tanks inside the structure could be maintained. The individual derricks can weigh up to a million pounds. The crane was apparently tested several days prior to the collapse, and it lifted up 800,000 pounds without incident.

Jim Roecker, LyondellBasell's vice president of operations, denied any plans for the crane to be operating on the day of the collapse. "As far as we're concerned, there were no planned lifts with that crane for today. We're going to be working with the contract company that operates that crane to determine if they were involved in any type of activity at the time of the incident. We certainly did not know anything that was planned," Roecker said. The crane had only recently been assembled, and was not scheduled for work until the following week.

Cranes operate in Texas without any state or local government oversight. According to KPRC Local 2, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) fined the operators of the Houston facility for 11 serious safety violations in 2006 following an investigation into a pipe explosion earlier that year. OSHA has announced that it will undertake an investigation into this latest collapse.

The Houston crane collapse is only the most recent in an emerging epidemic of crane-related workplace disasters. The situation is the direst in the construction industry, where the housing crisis has put pressure on construction firms to cut costs by lowering safety standards, rushing deadlines, and using cheaper materials. Construction is the second most dangerous occupation in the US, after transportation, with four construction workers dying on average every day.

In Harris County, Texas, a crane operator was killed last month when his crane fell on top of him at the construction site of a wastewater treatment plant.

In March of this year, seven people were killed in Manhattan in New York City when a 22-story crane broke apart. Falling parts of the crane buckled streets, destroyed a townhouse, and sheared away the side of a six-story building. In May, another Manhattan crane collapse killed two workers, severely injured others, and smashed a luxury apartment building under construction. Fifteen construction workers have been killed on the job in New York City so far this year, an increase over 12 in 2007.

Also in March of this year, a crane collapse in Miami, Florida, killed two workers and injured five others on the site of a high-rise condominium under construction. A 20-foot-long section of the crane broke off and fell 30 stories onto a two-story house. In June, another Miami crane broke apart, seriously injuring a worker. The worker's son, also operating the crane at the time, escaped unhurt.

In May, three ironworkers were injured, two critically, when a crane collapsed at the Black Thunder coal mine in northeastern Wyoming.

Over the past two years, 11 workers have been killed in MGM Mirage's CityCenter project in Las Vegas, Nevada, dubbed by local workers as the "CityCemetery." The most recent death was that of Dustin Tartar of Henderson, Nevada, who was killed May 31 when he was caught between the counterweight system and the track of the crane he was operating.

In northern Vietnam, a crane collapsed last week while it was being erected, killing seven workers. Two workers at the Cai Lan port in Quang Ninh province were killed instantly, and five more have since died from their injuries.



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