

Eleven workers missing after Louisiana oil rig explosion

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Eleven workers were still missing in the Gulf of Mexico Wednesday night, 24 hours after an explosion on a British Petroleum (BP) oil rig 50 miles off the coast of Louisiana. Seventeen workers were seriously injured, and three remained in critical condition at the time of writing. The remaining 98 of the rig's 126-person workforce were being transported by boat to safety.

The cause of the explosion on Deepwater Horizon, which occurred at about 10 p.m. local time on Tuesday, remains unknown.

The anxiety of families whose loved ones are missing was heightened by apparently false reports that they had been recovered early in the afternoon. According to one report, a life raft was seen with workers on it four hours after the explosion. These stories, which originated from local officials, were disputed by the US Coast Guard. "We're hoping everyone's in a life raft," said US Coast Guard officer Mike O'Berry.

Search and rescue teams operating on planes, helicopters, and boats were to continue through the night.

The explosion on the rig Deepwater Horizon comes a little more than two weeks after an explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine near Montcoal, West Virginia, killed 29 workers, the deadliest coal mine disaster in the US since 1970. Mine owner AT Massey operated the mine in disregard of basic safety requirements. On April 2, an explosion at a Tesoro Corporation oil refinery in Anacortes, Washington, took the lives of five workers.

BP, one of the world's three largest oil companies, quickly released a statement declaring that rig operator Transocean is responsible for safety. Transocean is the world's biggest offshore drilling contractor, operating 146 rigs globally and employing over 21,000 workers.

Though its corporate operations are in Houston, Transocean has been officially headquartered in the Cayman Islands and Switzerland in recent years.

Seventy-six of the workers at the rig that exploded were employees of Transocean, and six worked for BP. The rest were employed by third-party subcontractors.

Located about fifty miles southeast of Venice, Louisiana, Deepwater Horizon is a state-of-the-art semisubmersible, or floating, rig, capable of operating in waters at a depth of 8,000 feet. It was built by Hyundai Heavy Industries Shipyard in South Korea in 2001. At 396 feet long, 256 yards wide, and with a potential drilling depth of over 5 miles, the rig is large by industry standards.

Flames were still shooting up from the rig on Wednesday evening, and it was tilting at about 10 degrees. The rig was leaking 13,000 gallons of crude oil per hour, but most of this has been consumed in the blaze. The potential for environmental problems resulting from the disaster was not clear.

BP began drilling with Deepwater Horizon as part of its Macondo prospect in the deep waters of the Gulf in an area known as the "Mississippi Canyon," which has become a center of competition among the big oil firms. It had yet to extract oil.

"The deepwater Gulf of Mexico is a key focus of the western oil majors and a significant exploration hotspot," according to the *Wall Street Journal*. "Last year, BP announced a 'giant' discovery in the Gulf, saying its Tiber prospect, south of Louisiana, contained some three billion barrels of oil. Finds like Tiber have resurrected a region that was dismissed as the 'Dead Sea' in the early 1990s after the majors drilled a string of dry holes."

According *Forbes* energy writer Christopher Helman, the explosion may have been caused by what is known

as a “blowout” that results when a fluid used as both a drill lubricant and sealant fails to seal off a newly-struck oil or gas reservoir. Oil then moves up the well bore, potentially igniting.

The Coast Guard, a branch of the US military, and the Minerals Management Service (MMS) of the Department of the Interior will reportedly conduct the investigation. The US Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board may also investigate.

Injured workers and the families of the missing can have little confidence that the MMS will conduct a fair investigation. Even by the standards of Washington, MMS is brazen in its open subservience to the big oil firms and their contractors. In 2008, an inspector general’s report revealed a “culture of ethical failure” rampant in the agency, with eight officials accepting gifts from corporate lobbyists, including concert and sporting event tickets, ski trips, golf outings, dinners, and drinks. The report also concluded that officials “frequently consumed alcohol at industry functions, had used cocaine and marijuana, and had sexual relationships with oil and gas company representatives.” (See “Rampant corruption at US agency responsible for collecting oil royalties”)

In his campaign for the presidency, Barack Obama promised to usher in “transparency” and stiffen regulatory penalties for corporate abuse of safety and environmental rules. As the Upper Big Branch mine disaster reveals, however, there has in fact been no change in the enforcement of safety violations under Obama.

Obama has also promoted a vast expansion of offshore drilling as a cornerstone of his energy policy, including ending a moratorium on drilling off the Atlantic coast shelf stretching from Delaware to southern Florida, and extending drilling to sensitive areas in Alaskan waters.

This profit-driven pursuit of deep-sea oil is a notoriously dangerous. Since 2001 there have been 69 deaths, 1,349 injuries and 858 fires or explosions on oil rigs operating in the Gulf of Mexico alone, according to the International Association of Drilling Contractors. These are extremely high injury and death rates when one considers that there are only 35,000 oil workers in the Gulf at any given time.

As is the case in West Virginia, residents of the poverty-stricken Gulf Coast have little choice but to

take work on the oil rigs. This is the same region that was abandoned by the Bush administration when Hurricane Katrina hit with devastating consequences in 2005. In spite of campaign promises, Obama has done nothing to alleviate conditions of dire poverty and destroyed infrastructure.



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