

Search ended for eleven workers missing in Louisiana oil rig explosion

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The US Coast Guard Friday evening ended the search for eleven workers missing since an oil rig explosion on Tuesday night. The blast occurred on a British Petroleum (BP)-contracted oil rig, Deepwater Horizon, owned and operated by Transocean 50 miles off the coast of Louisiana. Three workers remain in critical condition.

The rig was manned by 126 workers. Seventeen were evacuated to Gulf Coast hospitals, and 98 other survivors were transported by boat to New Orleans early Thursday morning.

The search for the 11 missing workers continued on Friday, but family members say authorities have told them the men likely died in the explosion. Rescue workers were unable to search the rig platform due to a towering fire that continued to burn until Friday morning, when the rig finally collapsed and disappeared below the water's surface.

The *New Orleans Times-Picayune* reported that the "survivability period" ended at 3 p.m. Thursday, but search operations—which reportedly spanned an area of 5,000 square miles—continued through Friday afternoon.

The names of the missing have not been officially released, but some family members have come forward. Among those unaccounted for is Dale Burkeen, 37, who operated a crane on the rig. It would have been Burkeen's job, family members say, to evacuate crew members before leaving himself. Burkeen leaves behind a wife, Rhonda, and two children, ages 14 and 6.

The White House has responded to the disaster with callousness. "In all honesty I doubt this is the first accident that has happened and I doubt it will be the last," Obama press secretary Robert Gibbs told reporters Friday. Gibbs said the accident would not change Obama's call for a vast expansion of offshore and deep-sea oil drilling in previously protected areas, including the Atlantic coast stretching from Delaware to southern Florida, Alaskan waters, and other parts of the Gulf of Mexico.

Concerns over a major environmental disaster in the Gulf of Mexico were lessened on Friday when it was announced that the exploration hole appeared to be no longer emitting oil.

No cause for the explosion has been officially determined, but the consensus among experts is that a "blowout" took place on the semi-submersible, or floating, rig. A blowout occurs when oil from a new find moves up the drill bore, blowing apart machinery and potentially igniting.

The rig was built at the Hyundai Heavy Industries Shipyard in South Korea in 2001. Valued at between \$400 million and \$600 million, Deepwater Horizon was capable of operating in waters at a depth of 8,000 feet. Last year it set a record by drilling more than six miles beneath the ocean floor.

The disaster in the Gulf is the latest in a string of deadly workplace accidents in US energy extraction and processing. While the Obama administration, like the Bush administration before it, has promoted a vast expansion of coal and oil production, it has done nothing to improve the industries' miserable safety record.

The explosion on Deepwater Horizon came little more than two weeks after an explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine near Montcoal, West Virginia killed 29 workers, making it the deadliest coal mine disaster in the US since 1970. Mine owner Massey Energy had been cited for hundreds of safety violations at the Upper Big Branch operation.

On April 2, an explosion at a Tesoro Corporation oil refinery in Anacortes, Washington took the lives of six workers. Tesoro was also running the factory in violation of safety regulations. It was in the process of appealing citations by government safety officials.

BP has a history of violating regulations with impunity, with fatal consequences. In 2005, an explosion took place at a BP oil refinery in Texas City, Texas, killing 15

workers and injuring 170 others. BP had been cited for numerous safety violations prior to the explosion. In 2009, it was fined \$87 million for failing to address some of the same violations that caused the 2005 blast. BP has appealed the fine.

Since 2001, 69 oil workers have died in accidents in the Gulf of Mexico, while 1,349 workers, sometimes called “roughnecks,” have been injured. A total of 858 fires and explosions have taken place, according to the Minerals Management Service (MMS) of the US Department of the Interior.

The fatality rate among oil and gas workers was seven times greater than for the general work force between 2003 and 2007, according to data from the US Labor Department. Between 2002 and 2007, 598 workers died in accidents in the oil and gas industry, and the number of annual deaths increased by 70 percent over the same span. While the workforce grew during that period, the death rate grew much faster.

According to a September, 2008 analysis by the Associated Press, the increase in death and injury is owed to factors beyond just the expansion of industry activity during the decade’s energy boom. The other factors listed in the analysis all point to the ruthless profit drive of Big Oil—and the complicity of government regulators:

- “A high-pressure environment where workplace safety lapses are common”
- “Government agencies responsible for enforcing the rules rarely dole out tough penalties”
- “An influx of new workers hired to operate all those rigs, many [of whom] are young, inexperienced and speak little English”
- Use of drugs and alcohol among workers “to get through 12-hour shifts and labor up to 14 days in a row”

While the precise cause of the Deepwater Horizon explosion remains unknown, the wife of one of the missing men has brought a lawsuit against BP and Transocean. The complaint, filed by Natalie Roshto, whose husband, Shane Roshto, is unaccounted for and presumed dead, cites multiple violations “including, but not limited to, statutes and regulations issued by OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] and the United States Coast Guard.”

The Minerals Management Service (MMS), the regulatory agency that oversees offshore oil production, reported Friday that Deepwater Horizon had passed a series of recent inspections, the last one taking place April 1. However, MMS has a record, even by Washington’s standards, of brazen corruption. In 2008, an inspector’s

general investigation revealed a “culture of ethical failure” typified by various forms of oil industry bribery of MMS regulators, including those involving drugs and sex. (See: “Rampant corruption at US agency responsible for collecting oil royalties”).

In spite of promises to bring “a new era of transparency” to government regulation, Obama has done nothing to beef up either regulation or enforcement against corporate disregard for worker health and safety, as exhibited by federal regulators’ indifference to multiple safety abuses at the Upper Big Branch mine in West Virginia.

The Obama administration’s energy policy, calling for the expansion of coal mining and offshore drilling—the same policy advocated by the Bush administration—is in line with energy industry demands. Intensifying global competition for energy sources has resuscitated coal mining and oil production in areas that were once unprofitable. This is the case with BP’s deep sea operations in the Gulf of Mexico’s Mississippi Canyon, where the Deepwater Horizon explosion occurred. Until recent years, oil workers called the Gulf the “Dead Sea” due to the decline in production in the area that took place in the late 1980s and the 1990s.

As is the case with West Virginia coal miners, workers in the Gulf Coast have little choice but to take jobs they know are dangerous. The pay, reportedly between \$40,000 and \$60,000 annually, is high only relative to what typical workers make in the deep south states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Texas and Florida, one of the poorest regions in the country.



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