

Deepwater Horizon workers knew of problems before explosion

Josué Olmos
23 July 2010

Two internal Transocean reports obtained by *The New York Times* shed further light on the criminal negligence of both BP and Transocean in the lead-up to the April 20 explosion aboard the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, which killed 11 workers and set off one of the most devastating environmental catastrophes in human history.

The reports reveal that Deepwater Horizon workers were well aware of mechanical and safety problems aboard the rig, but they feared reprisal should they speak out. The documents also strongly indicate that BP and Transocean knowingly disregarded basic safety and maintenance.

The first, a 33-page report, details confidential surveys of at least 40 workers aboard the rig, carried out by a third party and commissioned by Transocean, the owner of the Deepwater Horizon rig. The surveys, conducted from March 12-16—just one month before the blowout—reveal serious concerns among workers about safety procedures and the reliability of rig equipment.

According to the *Times*, workers told surveyors that they “often saw unsafe behaviors on the rig” and that “company plans were not carried out properly.” Some workers raised concerns that “drilling priorities [took] precedence over planned maintenance” and that this had resulted in poor equipment reliability. Another worker said that the rig had not been to dry dock, where it would go to receive thorough maintenance, in the nine years of its existence.

The investigators also documented workers’ fears of reprisals from executives on the mainland, who were said to consistently use “fear tactics” when workers reported “risky” situations. The *Times* notes the reports showed that “only about half of the workers interviewed said they felt they could report actions

leading to a potentially ‘risky’ situation without reprisal.”

Additionally, workers indicated that they often falsified data to be entered into the safety system known as START (See, Think, Act, Reinforce, Track) because “nearly everyone” viewed the system as “counter-productive.” START is an example of the sort of self-regulation pushed for decades by industry and politicians alike.

The second report, a 112-page equipment assessment also commissioned by Transocean, verified the workers’ concerns. The *Times* notes that the report stated that at least 26 components and systems on the rig were in “bad” or “poor” condition. Additionally, the *Times* notes, “many key components—including the blowout preventer rams and failsafe valves—had not been fully inspected since 2000, even though guidelines require inspection of the preventer every three to five years.”

The equipment assessment also revealed other mechanical problems that may have been directly related to the April 20 accident. At least one of the rig’s mud pumps was said by investigators to be in “bad condition.”

Experts have speculated that a lack of mud weight used to seal the exploratory well played a role in the blowout. Even in the last hours before the disaster, BP and Transocean officials aboard the rig had argued over the question of replacing drilling mud with much lighter salt water, which experts have criticized as particularly risky. (See “BP had prior warning of Deepwater Horizon blowout”)

Investigators also noted that the rig’s ballast system, which helps to ensure the stability of the ship, was impaired. Numerous other equipment problems are detailed in the reports.

Lou Colasuonno, a spokesman for Transocean, responded to the *Times* revelations in an email to the AP, stating that most of the 26 components said to have been in “bad” or “poor” condition in the released reports were minor.

Colasuonno flatly denied the revelation that maintenance was disregarded, claiming that all maintenance had been carried out according to the original manufacturer specifications. “A fair reading of those detailed third-party reviews indicates clearly that while certain areas could be enhanced, overall rig maintenance met or exceeded regulatory and industry standards,” he argued.

That the oil rig’s maintenance met or exceeded government regulatory standards does not at all indicate that the Deepwater Horizon was safe. Indeed, it has been the decades-long gutting of industry regulation under both Republican and Democratic administration that set the stage for the disaster.

In 2007, under the Bush administration, the Minerals Management Service (MMS) carried out three studies of the potential environmental impact of deep sea drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, including one that pertained specifically to the area where the Deepwater Horizon was ultimately deployed. The MMS’s results, largely dictated by BP, determined that a “deepwater spill” would not reach the coast and would not exceed 4,600 barrels.

In April 2009 the Obama administration granted BP a special exemption from a legal requirement that it produce a detailed environmental impact study on the possible effects of its Deepwater Horizon drilling operation. (See “Obama sheltered BP’s Deepwater Horizon rig from regulatory requirement”)

The newly revealed reports add to an overwhelming body of evidence that demonstrates the Deepwater Horizon blowout was caused by the criminal pursuit of profit.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact