

Oil rig fire in Oklahoma kills two workers, critically burns two others

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An oil rig fire in rural Coal County, Oklahoma killed two workers and injured three others, two critically, early Friday morning. The state medical examiner's office identified the men killed as Tulsa resident Kelsey Bellah, 27, and Ada resident Gary Keenen, 26.

The oil rig is located about 2 miles west of Coalgate, a town roughly 100 miles southeast of Oklahoma City. The critically injured workers were taken to a hospital burn unit in Oklahoma City via airlift, while the third suffered from minor burns on his hands.

The oil rig is owned by Texas-based Pablo Energy. All five men were employees of Lamont-based drilling contractor Dan D. Drilling, which conducts business in Oklahoma, Kansas and the Texas Panhandle. The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the State Fire Marshal have begun a joint investigation into the cause of the fire. An OSHA spokesman told the press, "We're just trying to put the puzzle pieces on the table and (are) looking at them." Neither Pablo Energy nor the contractor Dan D. Drilling would answer calls from reporters.

On its website, the contractor, Dan D. Drilling distinguishes itself "by performing our drilling services in a cost conscious and competent manner."

Oklahoma is the United States' fifth-largest producer of crude oil, third-largest producer of natural gas, has the second-highest number of active drilling rigs, and ranks fifth in estimated crude oil reserves. Oil production has historically dominated the state's economy, but a collapse in the oil industry in the 1980s led to the loss of nearly 90,000 energy-related jobs between 1980 and 2000, severely damaging the state economy.

Twenty-one percent of Coal County residents currently live in poverty, much higher than the national 14.9 percent, making it an ideal source for cheap labor.

According to a 2010 National Wildlife Federation report, Oklahoma ranks seventh on the list of states where "significant incidents" occurred on oilfields or pipelines between 2000-2009, defined as those "where fatality or injury occurred or property damage was greater than or equal to \$50,000 in 1984 dollars." In total, 113 significant incidents occurred on Oklahoma oilfields and pipelines during this 10-year period, with 3 fatalities and 8 injuries.

For the entire United States, 2,554 significant incidents, 161 fatalities, and 576 injuries occurred on the nation's onshore oilfields and pipelines between 2000-2009. From 2001-2007, approximately 1,442 significant incidents occurred on offshore oil rigs, including 302 injuries, 476 fires, 41 fatalities and 356 pollution events. Between 2004-2008, Texas, the country's largest producer of oil and gas, saw the number of fatal work injuries increase by 21 percent. More broadly in the entire American economy, more than 4 million workers are injured on the job each year, while in 2011 alone 4,600 died from work-related injuries in the United States.

The Oklahoma oil rig fire comes shortly after a pressure explosion at a drill site in Orla, Texas that took place last April, in which two men were killed and approximately nine injured. Another worker was killed in Colorado in November, while working on a Haliburton Co.-owned hydraulic fracturing site. Dozens of such incidents take place every year in the oil industry throughout the US, as deregulation has steadily accelerated over the past three decades.

Over the past three decades, and increasingly under the Obama administration, workplace safety standards that were won by previous generations of workers have been steadily eroded, with rampant criminality taking hold at all levels of government.

Major violations of workplace safety and criminal negligence are becoming more commonplace, with the most notable in recent memory being the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 and the West, Texas chemical plant explosion in 2013. In the November 2012 resolution of the federal charges against BP for the deaths of 11 workers in the oil spill, the company agreed to plead guilty to 11 felony counts and paid a \$4.5 billion fine.

The WSWs noted following the West, Texas explosion, “Between OSHA and state agencies, there are only 2,200 inspectors responsible for enforcing the safety of 130 million workers in America—which translates to about one inspector for every 59,000 workers. As a result of severe staffing cutbacks, OSHA has largely abandoned regular inspections in favor of investigating instances where there “has been a fatality, multiple hospitalizations, [or] where a worker files a formal complaint,” David Michaels, Assistant Secretary Of OSHA, told Congress in 2011. Michaels added that, in 1977, OSHA had 37 inspectors for every million workers, while today there are only 22.”

This same pattern of postmortem safety inspections, conducted by federal regulators tasked with ensuring the safety of workers, is now taking place after the death of two young workers in Coal County, Oklahoma. While regulators have been sidelined and rendered insignificant, the top 10 petroleum-producing companies generated \$2.8 trillion in revenue and \$150 billion in profit in 2009 alone.



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