Death of Louisiana refinery worker exposes USW treachery in oil strike

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A contract worker at Valero's St. Charles refinery in Norco, Louisiana, 30 minutes away from New Orleans, collapsed and died while on the job two weeks ago.

Although he died on March 17, the death of the unnamed worker was not reported in the local media until March 26, nine days later. Neither his identity, his specific job, nor the cause of his death have been released, with the company only confirming that the worker was not from Louisiana. There has been virtually no reporting on the incident since the first reports emerged last week.

A spokesman for the contractor's employer, JV Industrial Companies, a turnaround specialist firm, gave a few tersely-worded comments to the *Times-Picayune* newspaper in which he described the death as an "isolated incident," despite admitting the company did not yet know the cause of death. "It was just with that one individual," he told the New Orleans-based paper. "There was no operational or mechanical [work] related to the incident itself." An official report is expected to be released sometime in April.

The death is an indictment of the United Steelworkers, which sabotaged and betrayed the strike of oil workers, in which workplace safety, dangerously high levels of mandatory overtime and the use of highly exploited contractors were the most public issues. Although Valero's St. Charles refinery is not unionized, it lies across the street from the USW-organized Motiva refinery—a joint venture owned by Shell and Saudi-based Aramco—where hundreds of workers in mid-February joined the strike by 6,500 oil workers in seven states.

Only days before the death of the contractor literally feet away from the picket lines at the Motiva refinery, the USW signed off on a sellout agreement nationwide, which does nothing to address the deadly conditions in the industry. Instead, it provides for amorphous "discussions" on staffing levels and overtime, and promises of more labor-management collaboration, which will do nothing to halt the almost routine sacrifice of oil workers' lives and limbs for profit.

The USW has since forced through the deal at most of its facilities, including Motiva's Norco and Convent, Louisiana, and Port Arthur, Texas refineries, while leaving workers out in the cold at workplaces where the remaining companies—BP, Marathon and LyondellBasell—are pushing for even deeper concessions.

A real struggle against the oil giants, which have imposed tens of thousands of layoffs, stagnating wages and dangerous work conditions throughout the entire industry, would find widespread support from oil and gas workers, both union and non-union. The potential for spreading the struggle beyond USW-organized refineries was foreshadowed earlier this month by a wildcat strike by over a thousand non-union contract workers employed by Bechtel at a natural gas terminal two hours west of Norco, near Lake Charles, Louisiana.

This is the very scenario that the USW sought to avoid. It has worked consciously to block even a united struggle by all 30,000 USW oil workers, by calling out only a minority of the more than 60 refineries it organizes. The USW refused to call out its membership at the unionized Valero refinery in Maraux, Louisiana, which lies 30 minutes down the Mississippi River from Valero's Norco facility. The USW local at the Maraux facility reached a separate agreement on February 28 without calling a strike. This experience was repeated in Baton Rouge, 45 minutes up the Mississippi River from Norco, where the USW refused to call out ExxonMobil's massive refinery, one of the largest in the country.

The contracting company's claim that the death at the St. Charles refinery had nothing to do with work conditions should be treated with the utmost skepticism, not least because of recent incidents at both facilities in Norco. In March of 2011, another contract worker at Valero's St. Charles refinery, 30-year-old Victor Rodriguez of Houston, fell from a ladder to his death when he and a co-worker were exposed to dangerous levels of hydrogen sulfide. His co-worker, 28-year-old Joseph Barr, briefly passed out and regained consciousness "half way down a ladder guard," according to his statement to state police.

At the time of Rodriguez' death, the St. Charles refinery was one of 11 operated by Valero certified under the "Voluntary Protection Program" by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), a "self-enforcement" program run by the federal government, which provides three to five year exemptions from OSHA inspections in exchange for worthless guarantees from the company. At unionized plants, the union co-sponsors these VPP schemes.

Last August, an explosion rocked the adjoining Diamond Green Diesel facility, a subsidiary of Valero which manufactures biodiesel, causing a fire that lasted for two-and-a-half hours before finally burning itself out. Although there were no injuries, pollutants were released during the fire, and nearby residents complained they were not made aware of the explosion until finding out on the news.

The Motiva refinery next door has a similarly checkered history. In 1988 a major explosion, known locally as the "big bang," rocked the refinery, then owned directly by Shell, killing seven workers and injuring 44. The blast could be heard 20 miles away in New Orleans, and there were reports of the explosion setting off burglar alarms in the city. More recently, in March 2013, 56-year-old Michael Louque at the Motiva refinery was crushed to death when 16-foot-long cylinders weighing more than 1,000 pounds each fell off of the flatbed truck he was loading.

Days after the USW rammed through its sellout contract at the Motiva refineries in Norco and Convent, Motiva announced plans to integrate production at the two facilities, which lie 30 miles apart along the Mississippi River. The Louisiana Refining System, as the two facilities will be known, will be connected via pipeline, after which the Convent refinery's fluidic catalytic cracking unit (FCCU) will be idled and capacity at the Norco refinery expanded.

It was not clear from press reports whether any layoffs would accompany the move. Although salaried employees may be combined, hourly employees under the USW would continue to operate separately. Valero had recently completed a similar move, shifting gasoline production from its unionized facility at Maraux to its non-union St. Charles plant.

The San Antonio-based Valero Energy Corporation made $3.7 billion in profits in 2014 as its refinery operations benefited from the low cost of crude oil and other cost reductions. Valero CEO Bill Klesse made $15.8 million in compensation in 2013, the last year for which records are available.