

Four workers critically injured in fire at Louisiana refinery

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On Tuesday, a fire broke out in ExxonMobil's refinery in Baton Rouge, the capital and second-largest city in the US state of Louisiana. Six people were injured, four critically, according to news reports.

The company has released no concrete information about the accident, acknowledging only that there had been a "small fire" at the facility, which was still under investigation. However, according to anonymous sources who spoke with the media, the fire began when a crew attempted to restart the facility's alkylation unit, used in the production of gasoline, which had been shut down for repairs. According to sources who spoke to *Fortune* magazine, a compressor blew out during the restart attempt, igniting a fire that inflicted severe burns on four of the work crew, which included two female contractors.

The federal Chemical Safety Board (CSB) announced on Wednesday that they were launching an investigation into the fire. However, CSB does not have the authority to enforce regulations or to levy fines against the company.

Southern Louisiana is a major hub of the oil and gas industry in the United States. Its refinery facilities are clustered along or near the banks of the Mississippi River, a major conduit for shipping traffic. ExxonMobil's Baton Rouge facility is the fourth-largest refinery in the United States, with a production capacity of over 500,000 barrels per day.

It is located on the east bank of the Mississippi River in the midst of the second-largest metropolitan area in the state, with more than 800,000 residents. The site of the refinery is only three miles from Louisiana's state capitol building. While Tuesday's accident did not result in an explosion or the release of toxic chemicals, the large population living in the shadow of the facility would be placed at risk in the event of a major accident.

Tuesday's fire was only the latest in a string of accidents at oil and gas facilities throughout the United States. *Fortune* magazine reported that it was the fourth accident in only two days at refineries near the Gulf of Mexico. On October 31, one maintenance worker was killed in an explosion at a major gas pipeline running near Birmingham, Alabama, only a month after a major leak occurred on the same pipeline. And in August, an explosion shook the Tesoro refinery, the largest in the state of California, located in the Los Angeles suburb of Carson.

The Baton Rouge refinery has a long history of such accidents. On Christmas Eve in 1989 an explosion at the facility killed two workers and injured several more, blowing out windows throughout Baton Rouge. In 2014, a contractor lost both of his legs in an accident that took place on Thanksgiving. Last December, a fire broke out at the facility at 4 AM. While it did not result in any injuries, it was accompanied by a loud boom that woke up nearby residents.

Government safety regulations in the oil industry are weak to nonexistent, with an enforcement regime that generally imposes, at most, wrist-slap fines for deadly accidents caused by criminal corporate negligence. Unsafe working conditions due to decrepit and decaying equipment and machinery are compounded by fatigue caused by working the obscenely long hours, which have become a common feature of the general work environment.

Chief responsibility for the common occurrence of accidents in the oil and gas industry lies with the United Steel Workers union, which deliberately isolated and sold out a nationwide refinery strike in 2015 called over unsafe working conditions. The union refused to call out its entire membership, striking at only 15 of the 63 refineries it organizes, which together

employ 7,000 of the union's 30,000 oil workers. It limited the walkout in spite of the fact that corporate management was recruiting strikebreakers.

The USW deliberately avoided targeting the two largest American oil companies, ExxonMobil and Chevron, which were allowed to cut their own separate deals with the union. Workers at ExxonMobil's Baton Rouge refinery, which had already been operating under terms of a separate agreement before the strike, were not called out. This was done in spite of the gruesome aforementioned Thanksgiving Day accident that occurred only months before the beginning of the strike.

Only two Louisiana facilities, the Motiva refineries in Norco and Convent, were called out on strike in the entire state. Other workers were kept on the job despite the enormous sympathy for the strikers and the potential to expand the strike to other sections of workers, underscored by a one-day wildcat strike of gas terminal contractors near Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Despite the enormous profits being raked in by the oil and gas giants, in the end, the union forced through a contract that addressed none of the outstanding issues that provoked the strike. The deal contained meager wage increase, which will be eaten up by increases in health care co-pays, along with the creation of new corporatist labor-management committees and a promise of “discussions” with the union on outsourcing, staffing levels and forced overtime. As if to add insult to industry, the USW left workers at Marathon's Texas City refinery, where a catastrophic 2005 explosion killed 15 and injured 170, to fight on alone when the company demanded even deeper concessions.



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