

Two workplace explosions kill four workers in Louisiana

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The state of Louisiana was the scene of two significant industrial accidents last week. The incidents demonstrate the dangerous conditions prevailing within American industry.

This past Wednesday, an explosion occurred at a Packaging Corporation of America (PCA) plant in the small city of DeRidder. Located in the central west region of the state, DeRidder is the seat of Beauregard Parish (county). The explosion at the containerboard mill killed three people and injured seven others. “The incident involved annual repair work being performed on piping in the pulp mill area and resulted in three contractor fatalities,” according to a statement released by PCA.

Sgt. James Anderson, state police Troop D spokesman, stated that “welding activity was taking place in the vicinity of the tank that exploded,” and that “the tank contained ‘foul condensate, which is a by-product of the cooking process,’” according to a report published by local news station KPLC. Louisiana State Police, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and the US Chemical Safety Board (CSB) are reported to be investigating the cause of the incident.

In the latter agency’s initial report, it designates welding as “one of several types of ‘hot work’—or spark-producing operations—that can ignite fires or explosions.” CSB Chairperson Vanessa Sutherland noted further in the report that “[H]ot work incidents are one of the most common causes of worker deaths we see at the CSB, but also one of the most readily preventable.”

According to a report published by the southwest Louisiana news outlet KATC, PCA has “been repeatedly cited for safety violations at its facilities around the country—including at one plant that’s seen

five workers killed in the last decade.” The report further states that the “PCA has been disciplined with fines for at least 154 violations over the last decade—some involving death or injury—at some of its other facilities around the U.S.”

An unrelated explosion occurred near a Williams-Discovery natural gas plant in Paradis, approximately 30 minutes west of New Orleans, Thursday evening. Two workers were injured, while another, previously unaccounted for, is currently considered dead.

Coming from within a Phillips 66 owned pipeline, the explosion produced a fire 40 feet in width and height, described as “a large blowtorch” by the St. Charles Parish Sheriff Greg Champagne.

Todd Denton, general manager of midstream operations for Phillips 66, said that “the workers were doing ‘routine’ maintenance when the explosion happened,” according to a local news report. Denton added that it “will take a little time to get in there and determine what happened. ... We don’t know where the release point was or what caused the fire.”

Local homeowners, many of whom reported hearing a loud explosion when the incident occurred, had to be evacuated to a shelter that was opened by the Red Cross at a nearby community center. Residents were allowed to return home Friday morning after the evacuation order was lifted. Although the fire was contained, firefighters were not able to put out the flames until Monday morning.

In its statement posted the afternoon after the explosion, Phillips 66 stated that “the pipeline carries y-grade, or raw, natural gas liquids,” and that “ongoing air monitoring of the area indicates no health impacts to the surrounding community.”

“It’s burning clean. But it’s not safe to go near it,” Champagne told reporters while the fire was still

burning, adding “it’s just highly flammable, obviously. ... If it burns off, it appears, it shouldn’t be a danger. It’s just a matter of getting it burned off, and they’re trying to shut it off at sources. It has been shut off at the main source, but those are miles away. So they’re looking for some valves that are closer to be able to shut it down so it won’t burn so long.”

The Louisiana Bucket Brigade, a local organization critical of the oil and gas industry, published an article in January headlined “Louisiana Pipelines Falling Apart = 144 Accidents in 2016.” It concludes that “corrosion and leaks were the cause of 48 percent of all accidents.” In response to these staggering figures, Anne Rolfes of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade said “the oil industry will say that the problems aren’t so bad and minimize these accidents. The industry is like an addict—unable to even acknowledge the problem.”

The industry, which is a major player in the state’s economy and enjoys intimate political connections with the state and federal government, has seen numerous deadly accidents in recent months in the state. Last November, a fire broke out at an ExxonMobil plant in Baton Rouge injuring six workers.

An OSHA News Release from September 2011 cited ExxonMobil for “violations—20 serious and two other-than-serious—for exposing workers to possible fires and explosions, among other hazards,” at its Baton Rouge facility.

Dorinda Folse, OSHA’s area director in Baton Rouge, stated in the release that “this company exposed its workers to serious safety and health hazards by failing to comply with OSHA’s process safety management regulations.”

Louisiana currently ranks among the top 20 contiguous states that have counted more than 100 fatal occupational injuries annually since 2014. In the US, from 2006 to 2015, the number of fatal work injuries for wage and salary workers annually has been around 3,900 on average. In the mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction industry, the average annual number of fatal occupational injuries during the same time span was just over 110. Though the Bureau of Labor Statistics has yet to publish its Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries for 2016, the manufacturing industry saw a total of 353 fatal injuries in the workplace during 2015.

Penalties are routinely imposed on companies like

PCA and ExxonMobil for repeated work safety violations, but they are no more than slaps on the wrist for these transnational corporations. Such fines, as well as the toll on workers’ lives and the livelihoods of their families, are easily written off by these firms as the cost of doing business.



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