

Worker killed at ExxonMobil refinery in Beaumont, Texas

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On December 1, a 31-year-old female contract worker, Yesenia Espinoza, was killed while working on a construction project at an ExxonMobil refinery in Beaumont, Texas.

Espinoza worked for Echo Maintenance LLC, a contracting company that does work for refineries and chemical plants. She was working on a project to construct a SCANfining unit, designed to remove sulfur from gasoline, when she was stuck by a falling 24-inch pipe.

Espinoza's death leaves her two young children without a mother. A GoFundMe page was launched to pay for funeral expenses and help support her children.

In May 2016, a contract worker at the same refinery was killed after being struck in the head by a pipe. ExxonMobil, the world's largest publicly traded oil company, is expanding the Beaumont facility, which is located 84 miles northeast of Houston.

Houston attorney Mynor Rodriguez filed a lawsuit over the weekend, arguing that ExxonMobil, Bechtel, and Echo Maintenance were negligent and responsible for Espinoza's wrongful death.

In the lawsuit, Rodriguez states that the three companies were fully aware of the hazardous conditions within the refinery that led to Espinoza's untimely death. Bechtel and ExxonMobil are accused, among a long list of other violations, of improperly rigging and handling the pipe that caused Espinoza's death, requiring its workers to work in unsafe conditions, and failure to observe job safety.

Echo is accused of failing to provide adequate tools and equipment for safety purposes, instructing workers to work in an area known to be unsafe, and failing to prevent its employees from performing activities known to be unsafe.

In addition to Espinoza's death, the refinery is

investigating a fire that broke out, four days prior, in one of its crude distillation units wherein everyone within a 1.5-mile radius was forced to evacuate. According to a report filed with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, the fire started because of a leak in equipment. No injuries were reported from the incident.

"I feel really bad about this young woman losing her life, and her having two small children," Richard, a veteran ExxonMobil worker, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "There is lots of new construction going on in this area and that was a new project. ExxonMobil is always saying it's 'safety first' but you got to get the job done. The project the young woman was working on was behind schedule. They talk about safety but then they say you got to get this done before Christmas, or you got to get this done before the new fiscal year."

"Echo is a ratty outfit. It's one of things where ExxonMobil probably got the lowest bid. The construction workforce is very inexperienced and they are not given the proper training," Richard said. "The same is true about the refinery workforce. The company knows the new workers have a lack of experience and they're hiring back the old guys to help out in the training."

Richard said last month's fire and the fatalities at the plant were bound up with the lack of any real safety regulation over the company, which is permitted to carry out "self-policing" under an arrangement between ExxonMobil, the United Steelworkers and federal and Texas environmental and occupational safety regulators.

"The union has pretty much rolled over and gone to the company's side on safety issues, giving the company whatever it wants. There is no representation for workers," Richard said. Under the corporatist "Loss

Prevention Self-Assessment Program” (LPSA) scheme, the interests of the company, the workers and the government are supposedly all aligned, leaving out the fact that the corporate drive to slash costs and increase profit must inevitably come at the expense of the safety and working conditions of workers. “The LPSA is nothing but a silly numbers game, in which you have more auditors than workers,” Richard said. “The union and the company have a love affair with each other, and they are perfectly content to keep it that way.”

In 2015, the United Steelworkers deliberately sabotaged a strike by oil refinery workers who were demanding an end to grueling work schedules and unsafe conditions, which had led to a rash of fatal explosions and fires. The USW called off the partial strike without any improvements in safety regulations, with the USW only promising “discussions” about staffing levels and overtime, and more labor-management collaboration.

“The new standards on fatigue are a total joke,” Richard said. “They manipulate the rules any way they want to keep production going. I’ve heard union reps saying, ‘I’m going to retire in 10 years and get a position in the International union’s safety department.’ What happened in 2015 was the biggest sellout ever. I used to be a strong union man, and don’t get me wrong, I am loyal to the brotherhood, just not to the USW.”

USW President Leo Gerard has been one of the most steadfast allies of the Trump administration based on their shared outlook of “America First” nationalism. Meanwhile, the Trump administration is pushing massive tax cuts and deregulation that will only mean more profits for oil giants like ExxonMobil.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) certifies corporations under the “Voluntary Protection Program” (VPP), an empty self-regulation measure that exempts corporations from OSHA inspections for 3-5 year periods, which are renewed. According to its website, the directive recognizes employers that “have implemented effective safety and health management systems and maintain injury and illness rates below national Bureau of Labor Statistics averages.”

At unionized factories, the unions cosponsor the program. Even in certified factories, workers are still killed, and OSHA has reportedly collaborated with

unions, including the USW, to cover up the conditions surrounding the death of workers.

Beaumont, like other cities in the region, is still recovering after it was devastated by Hurricane Harvey. In the aftermath of the storm, 120,000 residents were left without access to clean water after the city’s main water pump was overwhelmed by floodwaters. The city’s was overwhelmed and forced to transfer patients to other hospitals across the region.

“I’m still living in a trailer while my house is being worked on,” Richard said. “After three months, they’ve just begun to hang the sheetrock in my house. It’s hard to get contractors with all the repairs that need to be done to people’s homes.”



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