

Funerals begin for five Oklahoma workers killed in gas well explosion

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In the week-and-a-half since the January 22 gas well explosion that killed five workers in Oklahoma, families across several states have begun to bury their loved ones as they continue to suffer the consequences of the deadliest incident in the oil and gas industry in almost eight years.

The funeral for Matt Smith, 29, and a father of a 16-month-old son, was held on Tuesday at the Southeast Expo Center in McAlester. Smith's family released a statement expressing their sorrow and support for other families affected. "These weren't just men 'missing' or 'lost' in an accident. These were men who had families who loved them," the statement said.

"When it's your phone that rings and someone on the other end tells you news that can never be forgotten, in an instant you realize that all those names and numbers, accidents and tragedies that we hear about every day belong to someone whose world will never be the same," Smith's family said.

A funeral was held for 55-year-old Roger Cunningham of Seminole, Oklahoma last Saturday. "Roger was a family man and definitely a country boy," Spencer Barnett, Cunningham's son-in-law, said according to local news accounts. "He liked being on the farm and was a hard worker who provided for his family.

"It's something I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy," Barnett told the local news. "It was a phone call my wife received and when she gave the news to me, we were all just in shock."

Other funerals are being planned for the remaining victims, 35-year-old Josh Ray, of Fort Worth, Texas; 26-year-old Cody Risk of Wellington, Colorado; and 60-year-old Parker Waldrige of Crescent, Oklahoma.

The explosion and fire at the Patterson #219 rig near

Quinton, Oklahoma was the deadliest energy industry accident since the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010, when 11 workers were killed in an explosion at the rig owned by BP, triggering the largest offshore oil spill in US history.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration and Environmental Protection Agency (OSHA) and US Chemical Safety Board have all launched investigations into the incident, but details on the cause may not be revealed for months.

The natural-gas well was under the supervision of Houston-based Patterson-UTI Energy Inc., a drilling company with a long history of work-based fatalities. According to information from OSHA, between 2010 and 2013 seven incidents occurred at Patterson drilling locations, resulting in seven deaths. This gave the company one of the worst safety records for any land-based oil and gas company at the time. In the past decade, ten workers have died at well sites linked to Patterson.

The company was fined nearly \$367,000 over the past 10 years for more than 140 safety violations, many of them serious. In 2011, OSHA fined Patterson for repeatedly exposing its workers to "a variety of safety violations that could easily cause serious injuries." The violations included "failing to keep electrical equipment free from recognized hazards and to utilize proper grounding procedures." Patterson was also fined for failing to keep employees from being caught-between or struck by hazards.

In general, drilling for oil is a dangerous occupation that often places workers' lives at risk. Workers are tasked with maneuvering heavy pieces of steel pipe and equipment, and working with highly pressurized hoses. The drill floor and tanks can contain highly flammable gases as well. In 2008, 120 people were killed in the oil

and gas industry, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). From 2003 to 2010, 823 oil and gas extraction workers were killed, a fatality rate seven times greater than the rate for all US industries, according to the Department of Labor.

Without a doubt, drilling for oil and gas ranks among the most dangerous professions in the United States. Workers are on shift for an average of 12 hours a day dealing with highly combustible materials on a platform where cranes swing heavy equipment constantly overhead. Offshore workers are virtually isolated in the event of a catastrophe, relying on the US Coast Guard for aid, which is never close even in the best-case scenario.

Tedrick, an ex-offshore oil worker who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*, described the hazardous conditions. “They pay you well and feed you, but the job itself is highly dangerous,” he said. “You’re on the rig for a week or two at a time, and it’s like you work to sleep. You miss your family and they worry about you.”

The BLS website states, “Many oilfield workers are away from home for weeks or months at a time. Exploration field personnel and drilling workers frequently move from place to place as work at a particular field is completed. In contrast, well operation and maintenance workers and natural gas processing workers usually remain in the same location for extended periods.”

Frank Branson, a Dallas-based plaintiff’s attorney who specializes in catastrophic workplace accidents, told the *Washington Post* oil and gas operations are inherently dangerous and many companies are lax on safety, especially as energy prices go higher.

“When the oil patch gets really busy ... it’s the time when the workers are most vulnerable,” Branson said. “Unless the company preaches safety and requires it be conducted by their employees and management, there are going to be injuries and substantial deaths.”

In fact, the US is set to experience the largest increase in oil and gas production the world has ever seen over the next few years, according to a report by International Energy Agency (IEA). The US government predicts oil production will rise from 9.2 million barrels a day to 9.9 million barrels in 2018. The IEA said the US will account for 80 percent of the increase in global oil supply between now and 2025.

Since 2008, the United States has seen massive rises in oil production, stemming from the so-called shale revolution. This refers to the combination of hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling that enabled the United States to significantly increase its production of oil and natural gas, which now account for nearly 40 percent of total US crude oil production.

Higher prices have led to a “drilling frenzy,” according to the *New York Times*, and ever greater dangers to the environment and job safety. This is being accelerated by the Trump administration’s lifting of whatever remains of environmental and health and safety restrictions on the energy giants.

The oil and gas industry was particularly hard hit in 2014, when global gas prices plunged and over the next two years the industry shed nearly 200,000 jobs in the US and an estimated 440,000 jobs worldwide. As prices have recovered, the companies have increased employment incrementally while using new technologies to maximize production and profits. Older workers are also retiring and being replaced by less-experienced young workers.

The industry in the US still has 20,000 fewer workers than it did in 2014 and the smaller workforce is being pushed to the max to meet production quotas, inevitably leading to more injuries and death.



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