

Refinery explosions rock Texas and Wisconsin

Trévon Austin
28 April 2018

On Thursday, a tank containing asphalt exploded at the Husky Energy oil refinery in Superior, Wisconsin, a city of about 27,000 that borders Minnesota and the westernmost tip of Lake Superior. According to authorities, 11 people were injured by the blast but only one sustained serious injuries.

The fire sent huge, toxic plumes of smoke into the air, posing a serious health risk to those living downwind. The noxious fumes prompted an evacuation order covering a three-mile radius around the refinery as well as a 10-mile corridor south of the blast where the smoke was heading. It is unclear how many people were evacuated. The refinery is in an industrial area, but there is a residential neighborhood a mile to the northeast.

After the fire was put out, residents were told they could return to their homes. But authorities later announced the evacuation order would remain and be re-evaluated throughout the night. Government agencies plan to conduct air monitoring tests to gauge the hazard, refinery manager Kollin Schade said at a press conference.

The Wisconsin explosion and fire followed an April 19 blast and fire at a Valero refinery in Texas City, Texas. According to authorities, the fire was quickly contained and no injuries were reported.

The Texas City explosion was heard five miles from the source. It shook buildings within a mile of the refinery. Workers at the Texas City Valero and Marathon refineries, which are adjacent to one another, were given orders to shelter-in-place.

Smoke from the explosion forced vessels in the industrial canal to leave, and the Coast Guard asked that no ships sail out of the port. No residents were asked to evacuate, but emergency responders escorted bystanders away from the area.

Smoke from the explosion was visible miles away. According to ABC 13, Valero estimated its Texas City

refinery emitted more than 5,000 pounds of alkylates, 13,700 pounds of carbon monoxide, 970 pounds of hydrogen fluoride and 12,000 pounds of particulate matter. The refinery also released oxides of nitrogen and sulfur dioxide at rates exceeding amounts considered safe. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality is investigating the fire and its potential impact.

Both the Valero refinery in Texas and the Husky Energy refinery in Wisconsin have a history of safety violations.

Although the Valero plant has no chemical safety violations from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in the last five years, it was penalized for two serious violations related to ladder safety in 2016. The plant has also been penalized at least two dozen times since 1997 by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality for air permit violations.

Texas City experienced the deadliest industrial explosion in US history when on April 16, 1947, a ship carrying more than 2,000 tons of ammonium nitrate blew up, setting off explosions on nearby ships and oil storage tanks, killing 581 people. The deadliest refinery explosion of the 21st century also took place in Texas City in 2005 at the BP Plc refinery, now owned by Marathon, killing 15 workers and injuring 180 people.

The Husky Energy refinery, Wisconsin's only refinery, was fined by federal officials under its previous owner in 2015. US Department of Labor spokesman Scott Allen said OSHA fined Calumet Superior LLC \$21,000 over emergency response plans and flammable liquids violations in 2015.

The city of Superior is no stranger to industrial explosions either. In 1992, a train containing benzene gas derailed south of the city, covering the region with a toxic plume and forcing the evacuation of nearly 30,000 people. The event became known as "Toxic

Tuesday” among locals.

These explosions underscore the impact of the United Steelworkers (USW) betrayal of the 2015 oil refinery strikes. Five months after oil workers went on strike, the USW pushed through a sellout agreement that allows oil companies to strip away many safety provisions enacted after the 2005 BP explosion.

Oil and gas operations are inherently dangerous and many companies are lax on safety, especially as energy prices climb. The US is set to experience the largest increase in oil and gas production the world has ever seen in the next few years, but there are 20,000 fewer employees in the industry than in 2014. A smaller workforce being overworked combined with lax safety conditions inevitably leads to accidents and deaths.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact