

ExxonMobil fire in Harris County, Texas injures 37 workers

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Wednesday morning a fire broke out at the ExxonMobil Baytown facility. The cause of the fire is still unknown. According to media reports, 37 workers were injured, receiving mostly first-degree burns. It was the second fire since March at this location and the fourth chemical fire in the Houston area since April. The last incident started in a gasoline hydrofiner, where sulfur is removed from the fuel to meet environmental standards. The Baytown facility, 25 miles outside of Houston, purifies chemical propylene as fuel for plastic processing.

Following the fire, plant manager Jason Duncan declared, "It is our number one priority to protect the people in the community and the people that work for us." In a statement earlier that day, Duncan stated that those who were hurt were being sent to a nearby clinic. He claimed at the time that only six workers were injured and that all workers were accounted for.

According to a 2016 investigation by the *Houston Chronicle*, a major chemical incident occurs once every six weeks in the greater Houston area, a staggering figure that points to the virtual nonexistence of safety protections in the industry.

ExxonMobil, the world's largest publicly traded oil company, has a history of continuous safety incidents and violations of federal and local environmental regulations, as reported by the *World Socialist Web Site*. In 2017, Yesenia Espinoza was killed in a construction project in Exxon's Beaumont, Texas plant by a similar structure that removes sulfur from fuel. Four days prior, there was a fire that was still being investigated and that forced the temporary evacuation of everyone in a 1.5-mile radius. In May 2016, a contract worker at the same refinery was killed after being struck in the head by a pipe.

In April of this year, in the town of Crosby, Texas, a

worker carrying a chemical tank died after it exploded. The fire at KMCO forced the evacuation of all residents within one mile of the city and forced the cancellation of all outdoor activities at scores of schools in the area. In 2016, KMCO pled guilty to federal charges of violating the Clean Air Act.

In 2018, the EPA and the state of Texas fined ExxonMobil a combined \$3.8 million due to its failure to follow the Clean Air Act in the state of Texas, including at the Baytown facility. Now Harris County has also taken legal action, filing another lawsuit following the fire this Wednesday.

Luke Metzger of Environment Texas, an environmental advocacy organization, said he toured the 100-year-old facility in 2012 and found that it needed "major upgrades."

The continuing safety violations by ExxonMobil and other chemical companies illustrate yet again how under capitalism basic worker and societal protections take a back seat to the drive for profit.

In the first quarter of this year, ExxonMobil reported \$2.35 billion in earnings, down from \$4.65 billion, according to CNBC. Despite lower earnings this year, ExxonMobil continues to increase production and corporate management has shown itself oblivious to the occasional slaps on the wrist it receives from government regulators, continuing its disregard of safety in order to maintain high levels of production.

The dangerous conditions in the oil industry have been abetted by the United Steelworkers, which has imposed a series of concessions contracts that have stripped away safety protections and have led to chronic short staffing, with workers often laboring 70 hours a week. When the USW called its limited strikes in 2015, it claimed that safety was the major issue. However, the contract settlement provided no concrete

improvements over safety, only promises of
“discussions.”



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