Corpus Christi, Texas pipeline explosion kills two workers

Chase Lawrence
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A submerged pipeline in the port of Corpus Christi, Texas, exploded and caught fire Friday morning after it was struck by a dredging ship. The explosion killed two crewmen, injured six who required hospitalization and left two crewmen still missing. At least three of the hospitalized crew suffered severe burns, having to be airlifted to a burn unit in San Antonio, Texas.

The Coast Guard suspended its search and rescue mission for the two crewmen who are still missing on Sunday. Capt. Edward Gaynor, the commander of the Coast Guard Sector/Air Station Corpus Christi told the media, "Our Coast Guard crews worked intently alongside state and local partners to locate the two crew members who remained missing, but unfortunately, we were unable to locate them."

After the vessel broke up and sank, around 6,000 gallons of diesel leached into the port, which the Texas General Land Office is trying to contain and remove, and the waterways are set to be tested by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. The cause of the collision remains under investigation.

The dredging ship, the Waymon L. Boyd, which had an operating crew of 19, now sits in the bottom of the port after breaking up and sinking following the extinguishing of a second fire later Friday night. It is owned by the Orion Marine Group, which is based in Houston, Texas and is a division of Orion Group Holdings.

Orion Marine Group was awarded contracts earlier this year to dredge the Corpus Christi ship channel for the US Army Corps of Engineers and to dredge a marine terminal facility for a private client, worth over $17 million combined. The work that the crew of the Waymon L. Boyd was performing was part of one or both of those contracts.

The Port of Corpus Christi, finished in 1926, was the fifth largest US port by total tonnage handled in 2018, and one of the leading ports for the moving of crude oil, ranking second in the nation for crude oil exports with the vast majority of its imports and exports being crude. It plays a key role in moving crude from the Permian Basin and the Gulf of Mexico, accounting for around $20 billion in economic activity.

Combined with associated economic activity, the port accounts for around 35 percent of the jobs in the Corpus Christi metro area. In addition to its important role in oil production, the port also serves as an important logistics hub for US imperialism.

As the Port boasted on its website on August 13:

> The Port of Corpus Christi continued its support this week for American military readiness, working directly with the U.S. Army in the movement of over 2,500 pieces of cargo. The operation supported the 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division...
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> A federally designated strategic military port, the Port of Corpus Christi moves thousands of pieces of DoD cargo annually in support of U.S. military operations and those of the Nation's Allies around the world. This week's operations included six vessels, nearly 200 commercial trucks and more than 600 railcars for unit transport to Fort Hood.
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> "Working to ensure our military is in a perpetual state of readiness is a mission the Port of Corpus Christi constantly strives to fulfill," said Charles W. Zahn, Port of Corpus Christi Commission Chairman.

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In line with its strategic importance to US imperialism, the port is receiving upgrades to increase the potential volume of military cargo at a time of massive austerity for the working class.

The Channel Improvement Project for the Port, which is set to widen and deepen several channels, was included in the US Army Corps of Engineers Work Plan. The “Strategic Plan 2023” from the Port’s web page states: “When complete, the deeper, wider Corpus Christi Ship Channel will be the deepest on the Gulf Coast at 54’ [up from 47’] and will afford enhanced operational efficiency and safety.”

The port has also been targeted for funding from the White House, with over $100 million included in the 2021 President’s Budget for the Channel Improvement Project, marking the third year in a row that the port has been included in Trump’s proposed budget.

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