

Explosion and fire at ExxonMobil refinery east of Houston

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An early-morning explosion and chemical fire at an ExxonMobil refinery in Baytown, Texas left four people injured in what authorities described as a “major industrial accident.” The site, located 25 miles east of Houston, is one of the largest petrochemical and refinery facilities in the US, processing 560,500 barrels of crude oil per day.

The blast occurred around 1 a.m. Thursday and the fire burned for hours, well into daylight, before emergency responders could get the blaze under control. Company representatives confirmed the fire had been extinguished close to 10 a.m.

The incident occurred in a part of the refinery that was undergoing repairs. Reuters reported that it happened in a hydrotreater unit, which removes sulfur and other contaminants as part of the production of diesel, gasoline and jet fuel, and had been shut down Wednesday after a bypass line leak.

While employees were evacuated from that section of the refinery, the rest of the facility kept operating while the fire raged.

Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzales reported at least three people were transported to Memorial Herman Hospital via Life Flight, an air ambulance service, and another was driven to the hospital. Those injured were contractors who had been repairing the leak. According to press statements from ExxonMobil, all four people are in stable condition while the rest of the workers and crew have been accounted for.

According to the Baytown Fire Department, the fire involved the chemical naphtha, a hazardous byproduct from the distillation of fuel. Naphtha is highly volatile and can cause adverse health effects such as skin irritation, nausea, and vomiting and repeated exposure can damage the kidneys and nervous system.

The flames spewed large black clouds of smoke into

the air, but the company and state environmental authorities claimed there were no indications that nearby residents would need to evacuate or shelter in place.

Harley, 22, who lives near the facility about 2 miles from the facility told MSNBC news that she thought it was “a bomb or an earthquake” and that “it’s very concerning. You have no clue what’s being distributed and being released in the air that could possibly be extremely harmful and toxic.”

Several people living in the area described feeling their homes shake after hearing a loud boom.

“I was just laying in bed, and then all of a sudden I felt. like, a wave,” Sarah Martinez, who lives right across from the plant with her 4-year-old son, told NBC News. ‘It was like a weird feeling, like a wave and then there was a rumble in my apartment and then the next thing I know, all my pictures in my living room are on the floor.’

Others in the area posted on social media, saying they could hear a loud noise miles away from the plant. Some said they felt their bed, and even their house, rattle and captured videos of the burning plant. “We’re fine, the house was well shaken, but nothing was stirred or broken,” retired truck driver Duncan Clarke posted on Facebook, along with of photograph of the burning refinery he took early Thursday morning.

Thursday’s fire follows at least two other catastrophes at Exxon’s Baytown facility in recent years. In July 2019 an explosion injured more than 60 people and some 5,000 locals were issued a shelter-in-place order. Another fire broke out just four months earlier in March 2019. The fire was extinguished just hours after it began, but officials said it continued to release toxic pollutants for over a week.

Workers say that relentless cost-cutting by

ExxonMobil has increased the dangers. Dennis, a retired refinery worker, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that regular maintenance of facilities have been reduced to increase profits and this has undermined safety and environmental protections. “This fire doesn’t surprise me because they have neglected their facilities maintenance wise. They do a risk assessment, based most on monetary loss,” he said, making

It clear ExxonMobil was playing Russian Roulette with the lives of workers and residents who live near the refineries.

Refinery workers, who normally work grueling 12-hour shifts plus overtime, report the most common causes of accidents is understaffing and poor training. According to the Labor Department, more than 1,500 oil rig workers died on the job between 2008 and 2017.

The Baytown refinery, first opened in 1919, is the fourth largest in terms of output in the United States. It spans 3,400 acres along the Houston Ship Channel and employs about 7,000 workers. Industry analysts say the explosion would lead to a further decline in refinery capacity and gasoline prices as high as \$4 a gallon. ‘They’re not going to have all systems go for a couple of quarters,’ Tom Kloza, chief oil analyst for the Oil Price Information Service, told CNN Business.

With demand returning as the economy reopens despite the surge of the Covid-19 pandemic, ExxonMobil’s profits jumped to \$6.8 billion in the third quarter of 2021. It has amassed so much profit that it is planning a share buy-back program of up to \$10 billion over 12-24 months, according to its website. Even as the company’s market shares rose by 37 percent over the last year, ExxonMobil laid off 14,000 workers globally.

The refinery is only an hour’s drive from ExxonMobil’s Beaumont refinery and packaging plant, where more than 600 workers fighting for improved safety and better pay have been locked out since April 30. The struggle has been isolated by the United Steelworkers union, which has kept tens of thousands of other oil refinery workers, including 7,000 USW Local 13-2001 members at Baytown, on the job.

In 2015, the USW imposed a contract on Beaumont ExxonMobil workers which removed them from the national contract. The USW previously did this to ExxonMobil workers at Baytown and Baton Rouge,

Louisiana.

But the attack on the Beaumont workers by ExxonMobil—which is using strikebreakers to maintain production—is only a dress rehearsal for the attack by all the energy giants against 30,000 industry workers whose national agreement expires on February 1, 2022. Although the companies are making record profits, the companies, led by Marathon, are pressing for new concessions, counting on the collaboration of the USW, which sold out the 2015 strike by oil workers.

The upcoming battle by oil workers takes place during a critical moment in the class struggle, amid growing working-class militancy, a revolt against the pro-company unions and demands for higher wages, reducing working hours and protections against industrial accidents and the pandemic.

Thursday’s fire is another demonstration of the fact that the safety and well-being of oil workers cannot be left in the hands of the companies and the corporatists trade unions. A successful struggle against ExxonMobil, one of the world’s largest corporations, raises the critical necessity of building rank-and-file committees, independent of the USW, to break the isolation of the locked out Beaumont workers, link up the struggle of oil workers with workers in other industries and with their brothers and sisters around the world to fight these multinational corporations.



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