

BP refinery in Ohio, where two workers were killed, has long record of safety violations

Jerry White

25 September 2022

Share conditions at your workplace: Fill our the form at the bottom of this page. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Family and friends are holding funeral services this week for two young workers who were tragically killed in a massive fire at the BP-Husky oil refinery in Oregon, Ohio, on September 20.

Ben, 32, and Max, 34, Morrissey were brothers, and both left behind wives and small children. Their deaths have shaken the small community, just east of Toledo, which is dominated by the refining industry.

BP has not explained what caused last Tuesday's fire at the refinery, where more than 580 workers process up to 160,000 barrels of crude oil each day for gasoline, diesel, jet fuel, propane, asphalt and other products for the US Midwest. It took company and local fire crews four hours to put out the huge blaze, which lit up the sky around the surrounding community.

The severely burned workers were first taken to Mercy Health St. Vincent Medical Center in Toledo and then transported to a University of Michigan medical facility. By the next morning, however, they had succumbed to their injuries.

According to their obituaries, posted on the Eggleston Meinert & Pavley Funeral Home website, Ben had only worked at the BP refinery for six months before his death. The obituary did not indicate how long his older brother Max had worked there.

Both brothers graduated from Clay High School where they excelled in wrestling, a very popular sport in the working class community. Ben got an apprenticeship as an iron worker and worked on construction projects for several years in the New York City area, including on the Tappan Zee Bridge, before getting the job at the BP refinery in March 2022. After graduating high school, Max enlisted in the US Navy before getting a job at BP.

Max is survived by his wife Darah and small sons, Wilde and Recker. Ben is survived by his wife Kaddie and small son Weslee. "Both were the best dads in the world," Darah

told the local news media.

The obituary from the funeral home read, "They had their lives tragically cut short while earning a living for their families."

Both workers were members of the United Steelworkers Local 1 Chapter 346. The union local is raising donations for their surviving family members.

A GoFundMe page for the Morrissey Children's Trust has raised over \$25,000 already and includes condolences from fellow workers.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) officials were on site Wednesday and are beginning an investigation to determine what caused the accident. By law, OSHA has six months to complete an investigation.

There are many unanswered questions about what led to the tragic deaths of the two workers, which must be investigated.

Workers at the refinery have long complained that repeated job cuts, outsourcing, exhausting work schedules of 12 hours or more, and other cost-cutting measures by management have undermined safety.

The BP refinery has a record of repeated serious and life-threatening safety violations:

- In 2010, OSHA cited BP North American Inc. and BP-Husky refinery in Oregon, Ohio, with 42 alleged willful violations, after repeated inspections of BP facilities following the 2005 explosion at BP's Texas City Refinery which killed 15 workers and injured 170. This includes 20 alleged serious violations for exposing workers to a variety of hazards, including failure to provide adequate pressure relief for process units.

"OSHA has found that BP often ignored or severely delayed fixing known hazards in its refineries," Secretary of Labor Hilda L. Solis said at the time. "There is no excuse for taking chances with people's lives. BP must fix the hazards now." OSHA proposed a fine of \$3,042,000. After the company challenged the fines, an administrative law judge threw out 36 of the 41 violations, downgraded their severity from willful to serious, and reduced the fine to \$80,000.

- In 2016, BP-Husky was fined \$35,632 for violations at the Oregon refinery, including five “serious” category violations related to the use and working condition of fire hydrants at the refinery.

- In March 2022, OSHA issued a serious violation and \$3,874 fine when employees were exposed to methanol, OSHA records show.

An unnamed source told Reuters the day of last week’s fire that leaking fumes from a crude unit may have caused the ignition in another unit at the facility. The refinery, a very old facility which originally started production in 1919, had just completed a once in five years “turnaround,” when production is shut down for inspection, cleaning and major maintenance and repairs. The process had reportedly been completed and production resumed.

The resumption of production at a refinery requires meticulous work, involving careful monitoring of pressure and temperature levels. Was this rushed or done without trained crews?

It is also the case that scheduled maintenance is often delayed or put off indefinitely in order to keep production and profits flowing. During the last strike at the Oregon facility in 2015, a BP worker told the WSWS the refinery was supposed to implement scheduled turnarounds every four years, but the last one had been in 2007, that is eight years before. “We are constantly putting on band-aids,” he said.

Earlier this year, a BP worker at the company’s facility in Whiting, Indiana, told the WSWS, “They preach safety, but it is meaningless. They expect you to do your job, no matter what.” During turnarounds, he said, “safety just goes out the window because the managers are paid bonuses based on metrics of how far ahead of schedule they are and under budget.

“They get around this by holding ‘asset team’ meetings where decisions are reached by consensus, and nobody is held responsible if something goes wrong. We say things need to get fixed, but they cut corners and ignore us. Our refinery is an old facility, and it always leaks,” he said, pointing to the dangers for working class communities just outside the refinery fences.

An electrical fire at the Whiting refinery on August 24 caused the company to temporarily close the facility located about 15 miles southeast of Chicago. Fortunately, no one was hurt.

BP is also in the process of selling off its remaining 50 percent stake at the Oregon refinery to Calgary-based Cenovus, which combined with Husky in 2021. When the transaction is completed before the end of the year, the more than 580 employees at the Toledo refinery will become employees of Cenovus. If BP was already in the process of

selling off its stake for \$300 million, did it delay or cancel any crucial repair work?

Finally, what did the United Steelworkers know about dangerous conditions and safety violations at the refinery? The USW, which has 315 members at the facility, operates joint labor-management safety committees with BP.

Rank-and-file workers have long denounced these committees for doing nothing to protect their lives and health. The union and company hand pick committee members, and they are paid more and enjoy a regular eight-hour day, five days a week, with holidays off, rather than shift work, if they toe the company line.

Although the revenue and profits of the oil companies have fully recovered from the pandemic-driven economic crash in 2020, BP and the other oil giants are determined to keep labor costs as low as possible. For months they have been increasing production to profit from rising prices after laying off 60,000 oil industry workers and shutting five refineries.

The deadly fire in Oregon, Ohio, is only the last disaster in the global energy industry. Last week, 25,000 oil workers walked out in Argentina after a fire in a storage tank led to an explosion at the New American Oil (NAO) refinery, killing three workers in Neuquen. Earlier this month, eight workers were severely injured in an explosion at the Braya Renewable Fuels refinery in the town of Come By Chance in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Rather than wage a fight against these conditions, the USW, working with the Biden administration, blocked a strike by 30,000 refinery and petrochemical workers in February. In addition to demanding wage increases to match soaring prices, refinery workers were demanding an end to exhausting schedules and unsafe staffing levels.

Workers’ lives are being sacrificed for corporate profit. BP tripled its profits to \$12.8 billion in 2021 and spent billions in dividends and stock buybacks for its wealthy investors.

Any investigation into the BP refinery fire and the deaths of the Morrissey brothers by OSHA, the company and the USW will be nothing but a whitewash. That is why workers at the refinery must elect a rank-and-file safety committee, consisting of the most militant and class-conscious workers, to investigate this tragedy in conjunction with safety experts who are committed to the working class, not the corporations.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact