

The tragic death of two brothers at a BP refinery and America's industrial slaughterhouse

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This week the grieving families and friends of Ben and Max Morrissey will bury the two brothers, who died in a September 20 fire at the British Petroleum-Husky oil refinery in Oregon, Ohio. The tragic deaths of Ben, 32, and Max, 34, have shaken the tight-knit working class community just east of Toledo where the two young men grew up and were raising families.

A GoFundMe appeal to raise money to help the brothers' widows care for their three small children has already raised over \$31,000.

According to their obituaries, Ben had only worked at the BP refinery for six months before his death. Before getting the job in March 2022, he worked as an iron worker on several construction jobs in New York City. After graduating high school, Max enlisted in the US Navy before hiring in at the refinery.

After the deaths were announced, BP issued a perfunctory statement expressing its "deep sadness" and declaring, "Our highest priority remains the safety of our staff, the responders and the public."

In fact, BP has a notorious record of sacrificing workers' lives for corporate profit. In 2005, 15 workers were killed and another 180 injured in an explosion at its Texas City refinery. Investigators found that managers were pressuring workers to increase output and cut costs. In 2010, the BP Deepwater Horizon explosion killed 11 workers and caused a massive environmental disaster. Again, investigators found that cost-cutting contributed to the disaster.

That same year, the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) fined BP North America and the BP-Husky refinery \$3 million for scores of "willful" safety violations and ignoring or severely delaying the fixing of known hazards at its refineries.

BP contested the fine, and an administrative judge reduced it to \$80,000.

Shamefully, the tragic loss of the Morrissey brothers has been barely mentioned in the news media, outside of a few

local news outlets. It was then dropped, with the only remaining reference to the fatal fire in stories expressing concern over what impact the temporary closure of the refinery will have on the fuel supply and prices in the US Midwest.

In contrast, an article in the *World Socialist Web Site*, "BP refinery in Ohio, where two workers were killed, has long record of safety violations," is being read and circulated by thousands of workers.

What accounts for this? To the American ruling class, the lives of workers are cheap. As an autoworker recently told the WSWS, "We're nothing but numbers to them, and if we die, they'll just bring in another number." In fact, factories and other workplaces in the US would better be referred to as America's industrial slaughterhouse.

According to the "Death on the Job" report, released by the AFL-CIO in April 2022:

- Every day in the United States, 340 workers die from hazardous workplaces. In 2020, more than 4,700 workers were killed on the job, and an estimated 120,000 died from occupational diseases.

- Nearly 3.2 million work-related injuries and illnesses were reported in 2020. Because of workplace intimidation, the true toll of work-related injuries and illnesses is far larger, totaling between 5.4 million and 8.1 million annually.

- Occupational diseases caused by chemical exposure are responsible for 50,000 deaths and 190,000 illnesses each year.

- The number of inspectors working for OSHA is near its lowest number since it was created more than 50 years ago. There are just over 1,700 inspectors for 10.4 million workplaces. This amounts to one inspector for every 81,427 workers in the US, with the expenditure of only \$4.37 to protect each worker.

- The average penalty for a serious violation was only \$4,460 for federal cases and \$2,421 for states. The median federal OSHA penalty for a worker's death is \$9,753 and

only \$5,825 for state penalties. Only 115 worker death cases have been criminally prosecuted under OSHA since its establishment in 1970.

Behind these numbers are workers with spouses and children whose lives have been shattered and will never be the same. OSHA only releases their names in cases where federal or state safety agencies have done inspections. The cold and mistake-ridden spreadsheet on OSHA's webpage gives a few dates and names.

- July 2, 2022, Pompano Beach, Florida: Kavice Conner (54) died in fall from roof.

- June 21, 2022, Yarmouth, Iowa: Rickey Kammerer (29) died in silo collapse.

- June 17, 2022, Nashville, Tennessee: Christopher Rice (35) did [sic] in fall down stairwell shaft after being struck by crane load.

- May 19, 2022, Huntsville, Texas: Felipe Moreno (60) did [sic] in fall from scaffold.

- April 26, 2022, Houston, Texas: Robert Brooks (42) electrocuted while installing light fixture.

- April 22, 2022, Smyrna, Tennessee: Phongphat Mingsisouphanh (58) fatally struck by concrete pillar.

- April 20, 2022, Bridger, Montana: Marla Murray (71) and John Ahles (33) died in gas explosion.

- April 19, 2022, Sealy, Texas: John Joseph Wall (35) asphyxiated from Argon gas exposure.

As bad as this is, the government's list does not include the workplace fatalities caused by COVID-19, which has killed thousands of health care, education, manufacturing, logistics, service and other workers and debilitated millions more.

From the beginning of the pandemic, first Trump and then Biden prioritized profits over human life, funneling trillions to the corporations. A ruling class and political establishment that has overseen the deaths of more than 1.1 million people during the pandemic does not even bat an eyelash about the tens of thousands of workers chewed up in America's factories and workplaces every year.

The AFL-CIO may release a yearly report on workplace deaths, but the US trade unions are complicit in this daily carnage. The United Steelworkers, which claims to "represent" the 315 workers at the BP-Husky refinery, including the Morrissey brothers, has helped BP enforce 12-hour workdays, relentless outsourcing and job cuts that undermine safety.

The joint labor-management health and safety committees the USW operates with BP only provide the façade of protection. As a Texas Marathon worker told the WSWS earlier this year, "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."

With 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers set to strike earlier this year, Biden turned to the USW to block a walkout and impose a contract that does nothing to address workers' demands for safe conditions. As a result, the oil giants, which laid off 50,000 workers when prices plummeted in 2020 and never hired them back, keep squeezing evermore profits from fewer and fewer workers.

Oil workers all over the world are coming into action. Last week, 25,000 oil workers in Argentina launched strike action after the death of three workers in a refinery explosion. On Tuesday, Total workers in France joined the expanding strike by oil workers over pay and conditions which has shut down half of the country's refining capacity.

Workers all over are fed up with exhausting and unsafe conditions, including the 110,000 railroad workers who are pressing for strike action against the pro-company agreement the Biden administration and the rail unions are seeking to impose on them.

Any investigation into the deaths of the Morrissey brothers by OSHA, the company and the USW will be nothing but a whitewash. That is why workers at BP-Husky and other refineries must elect rank-and-file safety committees, consisting of the most militant and class-conscious workers, to investigate the causes of this tragedy and hold those responsible to account. This must be part of expanding the network of rank-and-file committees to assert the power and control of workers over the pace of production, staffing decisions and health and safety.

The fight to defend workers' lives directly poses the need for the working class to take control of the energy and other giant industries and converting them into public utilities, collectively owned and democratically controlled by the workers who produce society's wealth, as part of the socialist transformation of the economy in the US and throughout the world.



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