

“My brothers had each other’s backs, literally to the very last moment”

Hundreds attend memorial service for two young workers killed at Ohio BP refinery

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Are you a worker with information about the deadly fire at BP Husky? Use this form to contact us and help get the truth out. We will protect your anonymity.

Hundreds of family members, friends and coworkers at the BP Husky refinery attended a memorial service Thursday morning for Max and Ben Morrissey, the brothers who were tragically killed in the September 20 fire at the refinery in Oregon, Ohio.

The service, held just three miles from the refinery, was an outpouring of sympathy and solidarity from the working class community, east of Toledo, which remains in shock over the still unexplained disaster that claimed the lives of the well-loved brothers.

The flower-covered coffins of Ben, 32, and Max, 34, and a large photo of the two were positioned in front of the overflowing crowd at the Oak Shade Grove Schwaben Halle Pavilion. A large delegation of BP refinery workers was present, along with friends and neighbors from the area. There were also close friends from New York, where Ben worked as iron worker on bridge and other construction projects. Max was well known for running the popular Red Eye Pie pizza shop in town, in addition to working at the refinery.

A GoFundMe page set up by friends and family to care for Max’s young children, Wilde and Recker, and Ben’s son, Weslee, has already raised over \$41,000. A note on the page says, “Max and Ben were not only brothers, they were fathers, husbands, sons, uncles, and coworkers who impacted our lives through their kind humor, always smiling as they went on with their day to day activities.” It adds, “Many saw them as very important members of our Oregon community—and this tragedy has rocked us to the core.”

A “celebration of life”

The mood at the memorial was somber, but family members wanted the event to be a “celebration of life.” At several points, the audience laughed and applauded as family members and friends told stories of the young men’s exploits as children, high school students and young adults.

One question on everyone’s minds, however, is: Why was this disaster allowed to happen?

“Ben and Max were trying to make a living and expected to come

home every night,” older sister Carolyn Berryman said in her tribute to her brothers. “They had each other’s backs, literally to the very last moment. This is unfair. Two souls were taken away too soon.”

Carolyn described their upbringing in a “hard-working” household of seven people, where parents, Robert and Patricia, “taught us to treat people the way we wanted to be treated.” The family went through “good times and bad times,” she said, but “our parents never let us quit anything.”

Max graduated from Clay High School in 2007, Ben in 2009, according to classmates at the funeral who spoke to the WSWWS. These were the years surrounding the economic crash of 2008 when unemployment in the area rose to 15 percent and there were few if any prospects for young people to get good work.

After graduating, Max joined the US Navy and did eight years of tours in America’s wars before returning home. Max met his future wife Darah at a German-American festival about “500 feet from here,” Carolyn said. Raising their two small children while Max worked at the refinery and ran a pizza business was “stressful” at times, but he was dedicated to trying to make a living for his wife and children.

Carolyn then described Ben’s path. Like his brother, Ben excelled in high school wrestling, a favorite competitive sport in the Toledo area. But after a sports injury, he was prescribed narcotics and developed a serious addiction. After he “hit rock bottom at age 20,” Carolyn said, her brother sought treatment and won his battle against the chronic disease with the help of good friends he made in New York. He celebrated his tenth year of sobriety in 2020.

During this fight, Ben trained as an iron worker and “got every union welding certificate possible,” she said. According to coworkers, he worked on several construction projects, including the new Tappan Zee Bridge over the Hudson River, before returning home and eventually following his brother into the refinery.

Carolyn said Ben married his wife Kaddie in October 2019, describing their relationship as a “true-life love story.” Her brother, she said, was a “proud father of their son Weslee.” The couple is expecting another child next spring. “This is devastating,” she concluded. “We don’t know why it happened, but we have to keep navigating forward and keep their memories alive.”

The truth must come out

After the event, several workers who spoke to the WSWs said it was crucial for the truth to come out and the company to be held accountable for the deaths of their coworkers, including Ben, who had only been at BP for six months before he was killed.

“They know what happened, and they’re not saying,” a coworker said of BP. Another told the WSWs that workers heard the unit where the blaze started had been “unstable,” but management continued production anyway.

“I heard that at 7 a.m. the guys said there were problems and wanted to shut the unit down, but management refused,” said Justin Wharton, a teacher and good friend of Ben who had been the best man at his wedding. “Someone has to be held accountable,” he told the WSWs.

Mark, one of Max’s neighbors in Oregon, told the WSWs, “A lot of my buddies work in the refineries. These companies have zero concern for the workers they employ. They don’t care about anything except bringing in the dollar.

“The day of the fire I saw a big cloud of smoke rising from the refinery and thought, ‘What the hell is going on?’ Explosions and fires at the refineries happen regularly. Two days later, I found out my neighbor was burned to death, and I was sick to my stomach.

“We met three years ago,” Mark, a former US Marine, continued, “and we talked sometimes about being in combat, his business and his family. His business won best pizza in Toledo several times, and he worked hard at it, but when he talked about his wife and children, he was gleeful because they were his number one priority.

“A lot of guys around here work two jobs to make ends meet, and they work their asses off. Max was working a lot of hours, and he was pissed off about conditions in the refinery. He said they needed to get things fixed in a timely manner, but they weren’t. BP doesn’t give a rat’s ass about the workers, and I hope the family sues the hell out of them. They are always cutting corners on safety. It’s shoddy.”

He added, “The politicians are in bed with the big corporations who only care about the bottom line.” He said that the unions were also in bed with the companies. His father worked at the Toledo Jeep plant and “had no respect for the UAW” because its leaders had taken bribes to push through pro-company deals. “The BP workers should not go back to work in that refinery until an investigation is complete and things are made safe.”

“It’s sickening how the government lets the corporations do this,” he added. Reflecting on being sent to wars in the Middle East to defend the interests of the very same oil corporations responsible for killing his neighbor, he said, “Me and Max were sent to war based on a bunch of lies. We were sent to protect ‘Black Gold,’ and that’s what the US is doing in Ukraine too,” he said.

“The oil industry is a high-risk, low-frequency danger,” Toledo Fire Department Lt. Shiffer told the WSWs. “The workers are not baking cookies in there. The product they work with, crude oil, gasoline, jet fuel, is high risk. Our guys are part of the Lucas County Advanced Life Support system, and they responded to the fire at BP. When they recovered the workers, they said it did not look good for them. We heard rumors that the company had sent 80 percent of the workers home that morning because it was unstable. We don’t know if that’s true, but that’s what we heard.”

Addressing the fact that some 340 workers a day in America die in workplace fatalities and exposures to hazardous materials at work, even as both political parties have cut OSHA (Occupational Health

and Safety Administration) inspections to the bone, the fire lieutenant said, “The politicians take money from these corporations and write laws to allow them to get away with it.”

BP’s record of safety violations and the USW’s complicity

BP North America has not released any details of the reported explosion and blaze at the factory, which killed the Morrissey brothers and threatened to become an even greater catastrophe for the working class community lying just beyond the storage tank fence lines.

While claiming safety is their priority, BP has a notorious record of safety violations. This includes the 2005 explosion at the BP refinery in Texas City, Texas, which killed 15 workers and injured another 180, and the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, which killed 11 workers and injured 17 on the offshore oil rig. The company has also been cited for scores of “willful” safety violations over the last 12 years at the BP Husky refinery itself, including failure to provide adequate pressure relief for process units, failure to keep fire hydrants at the refinery in working condition, and exposing workers to methanol.

For nearly 10 days, the United Steelworkers International and Local 1-346 officials maintained a guilty silence. Then, on Thursday, the *Toledo Blade* posted the comments of Eric Sweeney, staff representative for International Steelworkers Local 1-346 who told the paper “there’s really not” clarity on what occurred, and “no one wants to rush to judgement.” He added, “We don’t want to jump to speculation and then miss something we should be looking at.”

The USW, which runs a joint health and safety committee with BP and maintains the closest communication with management, would know exactly what happened. They would also be fully aware of workers complaining about unsafe conditions on the morning of September 20, and any previous grievances workers filed over the company prioritizing production and profit over workers’ lives.

But the USW has spent decades acquiescing to and collaborating with management’s demands to slash jobs and impose 12-hour shifts on remaining workers, outsource jobs to lower-paid and inadequately trained contractors, and other cost-cutting measures that undermine safety. Outside the Local 1-346 office was a sign reading, “It’s OK to not be OK right now,” rather than any expression of indignation, let alone determination to fight, this corporate murder.

Workers cannot leave the investigation into this disaster in the hands of the USW, the OSHA and BP, because this would lead to nothing but a whitewash. Instead, workers should elect a rank-and-file safety committee, which will work with safety experts dedicated to the interests of workers, not corporate profit, to investigate the tragedy and hold accountable all those responsible for this crime.

If you have information about the BP Husky fire, or if you want to build a rank-and-file committee of oil workers to investigate it, contact us through the form below. We will protect your anonymity.



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