

# Pipefitter says BP used unskilled contractors on unit before fatal explosion at Toledo, Ohio refinery

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*Are you a worker at the BP Husky refinery? Please use the form below to send information about conditions at the refinery that could have led to the September 20 disaster, which killed Max and Ben Morrissey. Your identity will be kept anonymous.*

It is two weeks since the September 20 explosion and fire that claimed the lives of two young workers at the BP Husky refinery in Oregon, Ohio. Two brothers, Max and Ben Morrissey, aged 34 and 32, respectively, suffered horrific burns in the fire and succumbed to their injuries the following day. The Morrissey brothers, who were also fathers of small children, were buried after a memorial attended by hundreds of family members, friends and co-workers at the refinery last week.

There is widespread suspicion among workers that cost-cutting measures by management contributed to the disaster. Workers have long complained about manpower shortages, management cutting corners on maintenance and repair, and the contracting out of jobs to non-union workers who lack knowledge and training. Operators have also warned that exhausting work schedules and the practice of shifting them from unit to unit, instead of keeping them on units where they have experience and specific knowledge, undermines safety.

BP, which is in the process of selling off its share of the refinery just east of Toledo to Calgary-based Cenovus, has not released any details about the September 20 fire. Nor have inspectors from the federal and state Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). The United Steelworkers (USW), which has 315 members at the refinery, including the two deceased brothers, has not released any information either. Last week, Eric Sweeney, the District 1 staff representative for USW Local 1-346, told the *Toledo Blade* that “no one wants to rush to judgment.”

On ~~September 20~~ <sup>September 26</sup> the ~~Socialist~~ <sup>Worker</sup> published an article on the disaster that raised the following questions:

1. Was the turnaround process (when the refinery is shut down for repairs and maintenance) rushed or done without trained crews?
2. If BP was already in the process of selling off its stake for \$300 million, did it delay or cancel any crucial repair work?

3. What did the United Steelworkers know about dangerous conditions and safety violations at the refinery?

The WSWs was recently contacted by a union pipefitter who worked at the BP Husky refinery before the September 20 explosion. In an email and subsequent interview, the worker detailed unsafe practices by refinery management in the days leading up to the disaster. The information he provided is based on personal experience, the experiences of co-workers who worked the shutdown at the refinery, and from union representatives.

In an initial email, the worker, whose identity we will keep anonymous to protect him from retaliation, said, “This past summer BP/Husky hired 55 percent non-union pipefitters to complete the spring 2022 shutdown! It is documented that the non-union outfit— ‘UNITED,’ we’ll call them—worked the unit that blew up. They were seen doing shabby work, not following proper procedures on taking valves, etc. to the wash pads, and had many other safety infractions! I blame the plant manager who decided to hire ‘UNITED.’ Most employees were from Texas, and they hired anyone.

“Seems too coincidental the Toledo refinery was 100 percent UNION pipefitters before this past shutdown and NEVER HAD AN INCIDENT AS THIS! OUR LEGISLATORS NEED TO MANDATE A LAW SIMILAR TO CALIFORNIA’S WHERE ONE MUST

HAVE VERIFIED 5+ YEARS IN A CERTIFIED  
INDENTURED APPRENTICESHIP OR  
EQUIVALENT!"

In a subsequent discussion, the worker said, "I'm very familiar with conditions at the BP refinery. I am a union pipefitter who worked in and out of that refinery for years. I don't want to throw the non-union contractors under the bus, they have families to feed too, but they lack the training and knowledge to do this work. The company is only interested in getting manpower and getting the job done quickly.

"I blame this on the plant manager. He had a meeting with union leaders of the three trades. He told them point blank: 'I'm bringing in non-union pipefitters to do the work and when they mess it up, I'll hire your guys to fix it.' I really wonder if the plant manager has some interest in this United Piping out of Texas. These guys worked on the unit that exploded.

"This unit was very volatile. They were not taking the valves to the wash pads, to clean the valves according to specifications. They were using old gaskets and doing anything to get the job done. This is so the contractor can say, 'We did the job in record time.'

"Over the last few years, the unionized pipefitters have also lost break time. It used to be two half-hour breaks during shutdown. Now it's one 45-minute break. Management cracks the whip to get the job done and restart production as soon as possible. They put profits over people.

"I'm glad your publication is putting the word out. This company doesn't want to spend a few thousand dollars to pay trained pipefitters even though they are making billions of dollars. They should not be able to get away with this. They can spend the money to get the proper equipment and materials.

"I don't blame the contractors. But we never had a disaster like this before the shutdown. 55 percent were non-union. As a union pipefitter, I have to take a five-year apprenticeship, and I am not allowed to be in a refinery until after three years. The workers they brought in don't have an inkling of what a refinery is. They're just given a wrench and told, 'Go do the job.' It's sickening. They're breaking flanges, not welding pipes properly. All of that requires training. I went to the Local 50 pipefitting school to be top-notch.

"They try to say that union workers are lazy, and three guys just sit around to watch somebody else do a job. But it's about equality, safety and training.

"BP management also constantly switches the union

operators from the units they are familiar with. It makes much more sense for an operator to stay on that unit. Each unit has particular characteristics and demands. This is a very difficult and potentially dangerous process, especially after a turnaround when the refinery is starting up production again. If you're unfamiliar with a unit, you don't know what to expect. But management insists that operators get moved from unit to unit.

"What happened to the two young workers was horrible. The youngest one was only in the refinery for six months. They have wives and children who have lost their husbands and dads. The plant manager has to be investigated. The whole company and its practices have to be investigated.

"I've worked as a pipefitter in steel mills, refineries, power houses. Everywhere they are cutting corners and undermining safety. This is the richest and most powerful country in the world, and we have working conditions that are more like Mexico and other Third World countries."

Responding to the fact that 340 workers a day die in industrial accidents and from exposure to toxic materials, the worker said, "In construction, we have suicides, falls and exposures to chemicals and hazards. It comes from the top, with corporate management. They are always skimping on equipment and training. I've seen guys use channel locks as hammers because they don't have the right tools for the job. To me it's all corporate laziness and greed that produce these tragedies."

BP has a long record of safety violations. In 2020, Houston-based BP Products North America Inc. agreed to pay \$2.6 million in fines to settle long-standing air pollution, monitoring, maintenance and record-keeping violations at its BP-Husky Refining LLC refinery. Investigators also found that cost-cutting and speed-up contributed to the 2005 explosion at BP's Texas City, Texas refinery, which killed 15 workers and injured 180, and the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster and oil spill, which killed 11 workers.



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