

The value American capitalism places on workers' lives: BP fined \$156,250 for the deaths of two refinery operators in Ohio explosion

Jerry White
24 March 2023

In a wrist-slap punishment for one of the world's largest oil corporations, the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) last week fined BP Products North America \$156,250 for the deaths of two refinery workers last September. For American capitalism, the life of a worker is very cheap.

Ben and Max Morrissey, two brothers, ages 32 and 34, were burned to death in an explosion and fire at the BP Husky oil refinery in Oregon, Ohio, just outside of Toledo.

After a six-month investigation, the federal workplace safety agency cited the company for 10 “serious” and one “other-than-serious” violations. Among them were failure to control chemical levels at its Crude 1 processing unit, which “resulted in a release of liquid naphtha exposing employees to flammable vapor, fire, hydrogen sulfide, and explosion hazards.”

According to an OSHA press release, “As the workers attempted to correct rising liquid levels in the fuel gas mix drum, a flammable vapor cloud formed, ignited and then triggered an explosion in September 2022, causing the deadly burns.”

BP was also cited for failing to “develop and implement written operating procedures that provide clear instructions for emergency shutdown, including the conditions under which emergency shutdown is required, and the assignment of shutdown responsibility to qualified operators to ensure that emergency shutdown is executed in a safe and timely manner.”

In fact, before the deadly explosion, refinery workers continuously warned about the increasingly unstable conditions of the oil processing unit and demanded that

management shut it down. Their demands were ignored.

As one pipefitter, who has been working on the repair of the unit, told the WSWS, “The guys were complaining how volatile the unit was. One pipefitter with 30 years of experience said he had never seen such massive flames coming out of the flare, which burns off excess material. They knew something was wrong, and it should have been shut down at all costs. \$150,000 for two workers' lives—it's sickening. That's change in a cupholder for such a huge corporation.”

The fine, which BP has 15 days to challenge, is roughly 0.0005 percent of the record \$28 billion profits the multinational made in 2022, due to the surge in energy prices because of the war in Ukraine. At the same time that the widows of the Morrissey brothers are struggling to raise small children without their fathers, BP is spending \$2.75 billion on stock buybacks over the next few months, on top of the \$11.7 billion it spent last year to boost share values for wealthy investors.

The OSHA report is a complete whitewash of company, which has slashed over 20,000 jobs from its worldwide workforce over the last decades, outsourced maintenance and repair work to low-cost contractors and pushed its remaining workforce to work 12-16 hour shifts, in some cases up to 21 days in a row.

It is also a coverup of the role of the United Steelworkers (USW), which operates joint labor-management health and safety committees at the BP Husky plant and did nothing to enforce workers' demands to shut down the dangerous unit.

In a statement on OSHA's ruling last week, Mike Smith, the chairman of USW's national oil bargaining program, said, "While no penalties or fines could ever make up for the lost human lives, we welcome their findings and their efforts to hold BP accountable. Moving forward, our union remains committed to working with OSHA and Cenovus, the facility's new owner, to ensure this type of tragedy never happens again.'

In fact, the USW bureaucracy has spent decades collaborating with BP, Exxon, Marathon and other corporations to boost corporate profits at the expense of the workers it claims to represent. Seven months before the disaster in Ohio, USW President Tom Conway held secret talks with President Biden to prevent a strike by 30,000 refinery and petrochemical workers, which the White House feared would interfere with its war preparations against Russia. The USW agreed to a government-dictated contract with deep cuts to real wages that did nothing to stop the deadly conditions in the industry.

For BP and other corporations, whatever fines they pay for killing and maiming workers is little more than the cost of doing business.

BP is particularly notorious for sacrificing workers for 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, OSHA fined BP North America and the BP-Husky refinery \$3 million for 62 "willful" and "serious" safety violations, including 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.

The median OSHA penalty for killing a worker in the US was \$9,753 in 2021, the latest figure available. Far from being a "deterrent," this is a blank check for corporations to maintain unsafe conditions and relentlessly increase exploitation.

In America's industrial slaughterhouse, a worker is killed every 101 minutes in a work-related injury, according to the latest Bureau of Labor Statistics

figures from 2021.

The official death toll of more than 5,000 deaths does not include the approximately 120,000 deaths every year caused by chemical exposures and other occupational illnesses. It also does not count the likely tens of thousands of workers who were infected on the job and died of COVID. Those figures are no longer even being reported.

In their efforts to boost corporate profits, Democrats and Republicans alike have rolled back already lax safety regulations, leading to such disasters as the Norfolk Southern train derailment and the poisoning of residents of East Palestine, Ohio.

The daily toll in workers' lives is counted around the world. Last week, 21 coal miners were killed in a methane explosion at a mine in central Colombia. In late February, dozens of workers were killed in a landslide at a massive open-pit coal mine in China's Inner Mongolia region.

This slaughter will only be stopped when workers begin acting collectively to protect their own lives. The union apparatus accepts the endless carnage, just as it has accepted thousands of workers' deaths throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. They are nothing more than agencies of the corporations and the state.

The fight against the horrendous conditions of exploitation in workplaces requires the formation of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to transfer power from the union bureaucracies to workers on the shop floors. These committees, which are being built under the direction of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), must oppose the corporate dictatorship and fight for workers' control over production and health and safety conditions.

This will lay the ground work for the fight to end the daily sacrifice of workers' lives for profit through the abolition of the private ownership of society's massive industries and their transformation into public utilities, as part of the socialist transformation of society.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)