

Explosion and fire kill refinery worker at Marathon Texas City facility

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One worker was killed and two others injured in a fire that erupted Monday morning at the Marathon Galveston Bay Refinery in Texas City, Texas, 40 miles southeast of Houston. The fatality is the second in less than three months at the nation's second largest refinery and the latest in a series of deadly accidents in the US oil refinery and petrochemical industry over the last year.

Scott Higgins, a machinist and member of United Steelworkers Local 13-1 who was nearing retirement, died from his injuries, according to sources cited by Reuters. The two injured workers, inspectors employed by an outside firm contracted by Marathon, were rushed to the burn unit of University of Texas Medical Branch hospital in Galveston, but their condition is not known.

As of this writing, very few other details have been made public. Local news stations and residents reported seeing large flames and plumes of black smoke rising above the refinery, and firefighters reportedly took four hours to extinguish the blaze. In an initial statement issued before noon, the company said the fire began at approximately 9:30 a.m. but gave no cause and did not mention any fatalities or injuries.

Workers inside the facility reported the incident to the *World Socialist Web Site* before the company acknowledged any victims of the fire. "They haven't announced it yet, but there were multiple workers sent to the hospital, and it sounds like a fatality as well," one worker texted the WSWWS. "Emergency response team is still out there doing recovery. Haven't heard anything about the ones that went to the hospital yet either," he said.

Another told the WSWWS, "Several coworkers have been getting texts from family asking about the incident and the death. When there's a news story about a plant

accident, people start asking workers what really happened, since just about everyone knows someone who works in the petrochemical industry."

After reports of the fatality spread on news outlets and social media, Marathon officials finally acknowledged the fatality in a perfunctory statement issued in the mid-afternoon. The statement included the customary expressions of sympathy for family and coworkers, a promise of a "full investigation" and the obligatory statement that "the safety of our workers and the community is our top priority."

Workers report that Marathon, which made \$26 billion in profits last year, up 158 percent from 2021, routinely ignores their safety. On February 28, 25-year-old contractor Alfredo Reyes was electrocuted while constructing a scaffold at the refinery. Reyes was part of largely low-paid and immigrant workforce, which Marathon hires during "turnaround" periods, when the refinery is temporary closed for maintenance and repair work.

"It is incredibly frustrating," a worker at the Galveston refinery said. "They had delayed repairs because margins were low, and then suddenly the margins were incredibly high, so they delayed maintenance again. They've got shareholders expecting big returns and dividends, and keeping the shareholders happy is the most important thing to the executives."

But Marathon is far from the only energy giant that treats with indifference the lives and health of workers and residents living in surrounding communities. Explosions and fires are almost a routine occurrence in southeast Texas, home to the largest concentration of oil refineries and petrochemical plants in the US.

On May 5, a massive fire broke out when gas oil ignited at Shell USA petrochemical plant in Deer Park, Texas, a suburb of Houston. According to a report by

local news station KTRK, “After hearing a hiss, and seeing people run, some workers at last week’s Shell plant fire in Deer Park believe they’re lucky to be alive.” Following the fire, 15 contractors were hospitalized, toxic chemicals wafted into the surrounding neighborhood and contaminated liquid was dumped into the Houston Shipping Channel.

According to a report in the *Texas Tribune*, one day before the Shell fire, “Dozens of anxious and angry residents gathered at Deer Park High School’s North Campus on May 4 to demand accountability from state regulators for a 2019 fire that blanketed their communities with toxic chemicals.

“Less than 19 hours after the public hearing in the industrialized Houston suburb—held by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality—another large fire broke out at a Shell chemical plant about a mile from the school.”

On March 22, 2023, a huge fire ball exploded at the INEOS petrochemical plant in the Houston suburb of Pasadena after liquid petroleum gas leaked from a hose while it was being transferred from a tanker to a storage facility.

Last year, on June 22, 2022, a fire erupted at the Oxy Vinyls chemical plant in La Porte, Texas, but fortunately no one was hurt. La Porte is the same Houston-area city where two contractors were killed and 30 workers hospitalized in July 2021 after 100,000 pounds of acetic acid was released at a LyndellBasell chemical plant.

The Galveston Bay Refinery is the location of one of the deadliest refinery disasters in history, where 15 workers were killed and 180 injured in a March 23, 2005 explosion and fire at the refinery, then owned by British Petroleum (BP). The US Chemical Safety Board found that BP management had ignored “significant safety problems” and attributed the disaster to the company’s relentless cuts to spending for maintenance and infrastructure at the aging refinery.

Over the last year, refinery workers and contractors have also been killed in other states.

This includes:

- 25-year-old Dru Worker, a contractor employed by M&J Industrial Services, who was killed on April 23, 2023 when an asphalt tank exploded at the facilities of Seneca Petroleum in Lemont, Illinois, a southwestern suburb of Chicago;

- Max Morrissey, 34, and Ben Morrissey, 32, were killed in an explosion and fire at the BP Husky refinery in Oregon, Ohio, just outside of Toledo, on September 20, 2022. OSHA fined the company \$156,250 for a series of gross safety violations, including ignoring the demands of refinery operators to shut down an unstable unit before it exploded. BP is contesting the fines.

ExxonMobil, BP, Shell, TotalEnergies, Chevron and Marathon pulled in more than the \$225 billion in profits last year, amid skyrocketing gas prices and sanctions against Russian oil. Even as the companies spent billions on stock buybacks and dividend payments, management refused to hire full-time employees and farmed out work to lower-paid contractors, pushed their existing workforces to their physical limits and skipped scheduled shutdowns for maintenance and repair. “A lot of plants didn’t want to shut down last year when margins were strong,” John Auers, refining analyst with Refined Fuels Analytics, told Reuters.

Far from defending workers, the United Steelworkers bureaucracy blocked a strike by 30,000 refinery and petrochemical workers in February 2022 when health and safety concerns were paramount. USW President Tom Conway signed a sellout deal just weeks after meeting with President Biden in which the USW chief was told the administration would not accept any strike that could interfere with its war plans against Russia in Ukraine.

This underscores the need for refinery and petrochemical workers to build rank-and-file safety committees to protect their lives.



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