

US Chemical Safety Board issues damning report on 2022 BP refinery disaster that killed two in Ohio

Omri Wolfe
28 July 2024

Late last month, the US Chemical Safety Board (CSB) published a 169-page investigative report on the causes of the September 2022 explosion at the former BP Husky refinery in Oregon, Ohio, near Toledo, which killed brothers Ben and Max Morrissey. The report, based on a two-year investigation of on-scene evidence, eyewitness testimony and company and government records, makes it clear the Morrisseys' deaths were entirely preventable.

The CSB report also vindicates the assessment of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which explained that the tragedy was result of the subordination of workers' safety to profit by BP management, aided and abetted by state and federal safety agencies and the United Steelworkers bureaucracy.

After the release of the report, Ben's widow Kaddie Morrissey told local news outlet WTOL, "I'm saddened that this workplace incident could have been completely avoided if BP would have followed safety protocols and made sure their employees were coming into a safe work environment. We miss Ben and Max so much."

Max's widow, Darah, told local news station, "That whole place could have blown up. I have no doubt in my mind they were doing everything and everything they could to save more lives, but obviously I think they would want to be here today."

Max Morrissey, 34, had been an employee at the refinery since 2020. His brother Ben, 32, was an operator trainee who had only been working there since March 2022. The two were among the 315 members of United Steelworkers Local 1 Chapter 346 employed at the refinery, which processes crude oil for gasoline, diesel, jet fuel, propane, asphalt and other products.

The CSB report provides a timeline of events on September 20, 2022, which the agency described as a "series of cascading—and worsening—events" over a 12-hour span, during which time 3,700 emergency alarms overwhelmed management and refinery employees. Rather than shutting down the facility as many workers demanded, management ordered operators and trainees to take ever-riskier measures, leading to the fatal explosion. "Nearly everything that could go wrong did go wrong during this incident," CSB Chairperson Steve Owens stated.

According to the report, flammable liquid naphtha began to fill a fuel gas mix drum, which overflowed and sent the naphtha into the plant's various boilers and furnaces. The Morrissey brothers and two other workers were instructed to drain the gas mix drum as

fast as possible, unaware they were handling highly flammable naphtha.

After the other two workers left, the Morrissey brothers began draining the naphtha directly to the ground, creating a vapor cloud around them. The report says shifting winds from a coming storm likely pushed the cloud toward an ignition source—a nearby crude oil furnace. At 6:46 p.m., a massive blast reverberated for miles and a wall of flame engulfed the two young workers.

The CSB attributes the root causes of the disaster to five factors:

- Failure to implement effective preventive safeguards [and] an over-reliance on human intervention to prevent incidents.
- Failure to implement a shutdown.
- Ineffective policies, procedures, and practices to avoid and control abnormal situation.
- Alarm system which flooded operators with alarms throughout the day resulting in poor decision making.
- Failure to learn from previous incidents.

The Chemical Safety Board details how BP flouted industry-wide practices, regulator fines, and the lessons of past disasters, including the 2005 Texas City refinery explosion where 15 workers were killed and 180 injured. A CSB chart highlights the violations that led up to the 2005 Texas City refinery explosion, which continued to be ignored and contributed to the 2022 disaster, 17 years later.

As direct evidence of BP's gross negligence, the CSB included a 2019 incident report at the BP Husky refinery wherein naphtha was back flowing into a bypass line and accumulating in the fuel gas mix drum—precisely the precipitating circumstance that led to the Morrissey brothers' deaths.

The CSB quotes safety expert Trevor Kletz: "It might seem to an outsider that industrial accidents occur because we do not know how to prevent them. In fact, they occur because we do not use the knowledge that is available."

The report notes that refinery operators were regularly working 12-hour shifts and the company employed a practice of "job rotation," which undermined safety. A Hazard Alert Letter issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) six months after the disaster, stated:

[R]otating process operators among multiple positions,

instead of a single position, can reduce the level of expertise and knowledge of operators on the unit for which they are initially qualified. In the event of a process upset condition or catastrophic incident, this decrease in expertise can negatively affect incident response efforts, posing a higher likelihood of exposure to toxic vapor/gas, fire and explosion hazards.

But OSHA only issued a “voluntary recommendation” for BP to work with the United Steelworkers union to conduct a “feasibility study” on the effectiveness of the job rotation staffing pattern. This coincided with OSHA proposals for \$156,250 in penalties for the blatant safety violations, which led to the deaths of the two brothers.

In fact, the United Steelworkers bureaucracy has been complicit in creating these deadly conditions. The USW betrayed the 2015 strike, where workers at the BP Husky refinery specifically demanded an end to job rotations, exhausting work hours and other dangerous conditions.

In February 2022, USW officials sold out the ten-month lockout of Exxon Mobil workers in Beaumont, Texas and blocked a national strike by 30,000 refinery and petrochemical workers over these issues again. Backing Biden’s war drive against Russia, the USW apparatus signed a deal with the industry that ensured that this fatal disaster in Oregon, Ohio would occur just seven months later.

Immediately after the disaster, on September 25, 2022, the WSWS posed a series of questions that had to be investigated. These included:

1. Workers’ long-standing complaints that repeated job cuts, outsourcing, exhausting work schedules of 12 hours or more, and other cost-cutting measures by management had undermined safety.

2. Were the inspection, cleaning and major maintenance and repairs on the more than century-old refinery rushed or done with untrained crews in order to get the facility up and running as fast as possible and profits flowing again?

3. If BP was already in the process of selling off its stake for \$300 million, did it delay or cancel any crucial repair work?

4. Finally, what did the United Steelworkers know about dangerous conditions and safety violations at the refinery? The USW, which has 315 members at the facility, operates joint labor-management safety committees with BP.

In an exclusive interview with the WSWS, a pipefitter who worked on the 2022 turnaround at the BP Husky refinery discussed the numerous safety hazards exacerbated by overwork. He denounced the leaders of the USW and other unions for undermining the safety of workers and called for workers across the industry to unite in a strike to defend their living standards and working conditions.

In a statement on the CSB report, Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for US vice president, said:

of Ben and Max Morrissey were sacrificed for corporate profit. It details how BP ignored the lessons of previous disasters and rejected the demands of refinery workers to shut the facility on that fateful day.

But the CSB leaves out important information. BP was planning to sell the facility and did as little as possible to maintain safe conditions at the century-old refinery. The periodic “turnaround” upgrades, one worker said, were little more than “band-aids.”

BP and other energy companies also postponed maintenance and improvement projects during the first years of the pandemic. Then, as the *Wall Street Journal* noted, they were under “pressure to ramp back up to take advantage of high profits from resurgent demand.” It added: “Shareholders in big oil companies and refinery operators were hungry for cash following huge losses in 2020.”

The continued loss of life, injuries, explosions and dangerous chemical releases in the oil industry can only be combatted by workers organizing rank-and-file committees in every refinery and petrochemical plant. The joint labor-management safety committees run by the USW are a fraud. Workers must control production, including staffing levels, work hours, the pace of work and health and safety, and have full power to shut down unsafe operations.

This must be combined with a political struggle against both the Democrats and Republicans, which are both beholden to the giant energy conglomerates and have waged endless wars on behalf of them to control oil and other resources. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the transformation of the energy industry into a public utility, owned collectively and democratically controlled by the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

The Chemical Safety Board report confirms that the lives