

Two deaths and numerous injuries from chemical leaks in Texas and Louisiana

Omri Wolfe**13 October 2024**

A hydrogen sulfide leak at a Houston, Texas area oil refinery killed two workers, and left dozens injured on October 10. The day before, an ammonia leak at a Baton Rouge, Louisiana plastics plant sent four workers to the emergency room with serious injuries.

Both facilities had been cited repeatedly for safety and environmental violations. The Texas refinery was the site of a massive fire in 2023 that raged for three days and resulted in nine hospitalizations.

Disaster in Deer Park

The oil refinery in Deer Park, Texas, a Houston suburb, is owned by Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex), the Mexican state-owned petroleum company. It was originally operated as a 50-50 joint venture with Shell until it was bought outright by Pemex in 2021.

The cause of the chemical leak is under investigation, and hazmat teams were not able to enter the facility for hours, due to the persistence of high concentrations of dangerous toxins.

Hydrogen sulfide, a colorless gas recognized by its pungent “rotten egg” odor, is a highly toxic and flammable gas used in the petroleum refining process. Thirty five exposed workers were triaged on site by first responders and 13 transported to area hospitals for treatment. When emergency responders were allowed into the facility, they found the bodies of two dead contractors, whose identities have not been released.

The US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) notes that hydrogen sulfide gas lingers due to its higher density than air and in high concentrations “can quickly lead to death.”

Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez speculated that a flange may have been opened, releasing the deadly gas. Refinery workers commented on social media that this

“suggests multiple critical failures in the LOTO [lockout tagout] procedure for this line of work.” In August an autoworker at the Tesla Gigafactory in Austin, Texas was killed due to similar lax enforcement of LOTO procedures.

It took two-and-a-half hours for the city of Deer Park to issue a shelter-in-place order to its 34,000 residents, due to the risks of exposure to the toxic pollutants. Industrial disasters are common in the Houston area, the epicenter of oil refining in the western hemisphere, and cities like Deer Park have emergency warning systems, including sirens and text notifications.

Residents of Deer Park reported to local news outlets, however, that they failed to receive notifications of the incident or shelter-in-place order.

Chemical burns in Baton Rouge

The previous day an ammonia leak at a petrochemical facility in Baton Rouge, Louisiana caused serious injuries to four workers, all of whom were hospitalized, with two in critical condition. Ammonia is a highly flammable gas with a pungent odor that reacts with the moisture in the eyes, skin, and upper respiratory tract causing painful chemical burns. OSHA notes that in high concentrations it is “immediately dangerous to life and health.”

The facility is owned by Formosa Plastics, a Taiwanese petrochemical company that has been operating the plant since the 1980s. The facility was cited dozens of times by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) since 2000 for releasing deadly vinyl chloride and other carcinogenic pollutants and has maintained an EPA “noncompliant” status since 2009.

Baton Rouge Fire Department officials reported that a storage cylinder with a capacity of 150 lb (68 kg) broke, releasing the toxic gas. The ammonia quickly dissipated, injuring only the four nearby workers.

In July, an ammonia leak at a commercial food plant in Sterling, Virginia affected up to 254 employees, 33 of whom were transported by a fleet of first responders to area hospitals, some with critical inhalation injuries. The employer, Cuisine Solutions, was cited by OSHA 22 times since 2015 for safety violations—14 of them serious—and fined over \$160,000.

Handouts for the rich and funerals for workers

These industrial disasters are the inevitable outcome of decades of bipartisan deregulation, the dismantling of basic safety measures by profit-mad shareholders, and the transformation of union bureaucrats into corporate shareholders tasked with policing their members.

Speed-up, high turnover, lack of training, and lax safety enforcement lead time and again to disasters that are entirely preventable, impacting workers, their families, communities, and the environment.

Pemex, the largest corporation in Mexico by net revenue and one of the world's largest petrochemical companies, has the resources to support safe working environments. However, the so-called “left-wing” administrations of former Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador and current president Claudia Sheinbaum have been solely focused on shoring up the state-owned company's debts and returning it to the profitability of the last two years. Pemex made US\$6.5 billion last year in net profits. The Pemex CEO made only a perfunctory statement about the deaths in Deer Park.

US regulators have likewise created an environment where sacrificing workers to profit is the only financially sound strategy. When Pemex's adjacent chemical plant exploded in 2023, billowing plumes of carcinogenic smoke across the Houston area for three days and leading to the hospitalization of nine workers, the State of Texas sued Pemex and partner Shell for just \$1 million.

In 2019, two explosions occurred only hours apart at a facility in nearby Port Neches, injuring two and requiring the evacuation of 50,000 people. Texas Petrochemical Company, the plant operator, was eventually fined a mere \$30 million.

In 2005, an explosion at a BP oil refinery in nearby Texas City killed 15 workers and injured another 100. The *World Socialist Web Site* chronicled other recent disasters at the time, noting, “Besides small fines, none of these incidents have led to serious changes in the safety standards at the petroleum plants throughout the region.” The only thing that

has changed in the intervening 20 years is that chemical fires have tripled in the Texas and Louisiana region since 2013.

Another key role has been played by the union bureaucracy, which has helped to jointly oversee deteriorating working conditions. The Deer Park refinery was one of several involved in a limited nationwide strike in 2015, in which improvements to safety was a key demand. In the end, the United Steelworkers bureaucrats not only imposed a sellout contract, but left workers at the Texas City refinery on the picket lines to fend for themselves.

In 2022, the USW rammed through another sellout national contract, hashed out behind the scenes with the White House which then-union president Tom Conway openly boasted did not contribute to “inflationary pressures”—that is, wages under the new contract did not keep pace with record inflation.

Formosa Plastics is another example that “crime pays.” After decades of serious environmental violations, the company is in a permitting dispute to build a \$9.4 billion mega-facility in the appropriately named “Cancer Alley” along the Mississippi River—the largest petrochemical plant in the world—which they could not build in their home country. Formosa chairman Jason Lin told Bloomberg, “In Taiwan, the government treats petrochemical investment as a polluting industry and stigmatizes us.”

Over the last decade the State of Louisiana has handed out over \$9 billion in subsidies to plastics manufacturers, the vast majority of which violate air pollution standards, like Formosa. To “incentivize job creation” Louisiana workers have transferred a further \$17 billion in tax exemptions to billionaire shareholders at the cost of over \$500,000 per job “created.”

These trends expose the dead-end of capitalist politics. Biden, Harris, and Trump all trumpet their pro-capitalist credentials, which amount to ever-widening inequality, environmental devastation, and the sacrifice of workers' lives and livelihoods to the enrichment of the obscenely rich. The solution is to place these vital industries under public ownership with workers' democratic control—that is, socialism.



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