

# Explosion at Chevron's El Segundo refinery rocks Los Angeles

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Late Thursday night, a massive explosion and subsequent fire tore through Chevron's sprawling El Segundo oil refinery, a century-old complex that looms over Los Angeles' South Bay region.

The blast erupted around 9:30 p.m. in the refinery's Isomax 7 unit, a key system that converts mid-distillates into jet fuel, sending a shock wave through surrounding neighborhoods. Residents reported windows rattling and walls shaking; many initially believed they were experiencing an earthquake or some other seismic event.

Flames and thick black smoke were visible for miles, illuminating the night sky a hazy orange and prompting widespread alarm. But officials and Chevron rushed to reassure the public. They declared the incident "isolated," asserted that "all personnel were accounted for," and insisted there was "no immediate public safety threat."

Despite elevated levels of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) detected overnight, Chevron maintained that its fence-line monitoring systems did not record any breaches of legal emission thresholds. The shelter in place order was lifted early Friday.

The fact that no workers were reported injured is almost certainly a matter of sheer luck. But the absence of casualties says nothing about the long-term consequences. Elevated VOC levels, even if below "legal" thresholds, are linked to cancer, respiratory disease, and other chronic health problems.

The massive facility is economically and strategically critical. It supplies 20 percent of Southern California's gasoline and 40 percent of its jet fuel.

The Isomax unit's critical role in aviation fuel production immediately raised fears of disruption to jet fuel supplies for LAX, one of the busiest in the world. As of Friday morning, Chevron had yet to disclose the extent of the damage or how long repairs might take. Even a temporary shutdown could ripple through California's fuel markets, driving up prices in a state already notorious

for the highest gasoline costs in the country with many experts saying it could push prices up an entire dollar per gallon exacerbating the cost of living crisis.

Firefighting units, including Chevron's in-house team and local agencies, worked through the night. By 7 a.m. Friday, the fire was reportedly contained, though not fully extinguished. Roads near the facility were shut down, and Governor Gavin Newsom and Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass were briefed. Officials stressed that there was "no impact" on LAX operations, despite the refinery's proximity and importance to the airport — but such assurances ring hollow given how often they are repeated in the wake of such accidents.

More will emerge about the circumstances behind the disaster, but the fact that the conditions existed where such a disaster could take place testifies to the indifference of corporate American to elementary safety measures which are seen as a drain on profit. Indeed, the same facility suffered an earlier fire in 2022.

It is the latest in a series of massive industrial accidents which are a virtually daily occurrence in America.

They include:

- The August 27 death of three workers at a Texas sewage plant due to toxic chemical exposure;
- An explosion on August 22 of an oil and lubricant factory in Roseland, Louisiana;
- On August 21, six workers died of gas exposure at a Colorado dairy farm;
- On August 18, near Baltimore, a coal barge caught fire near the Francis Scott Key Bridge, which had collapsed last year after a ship collision
- The August 11 explosion of the Clairton Coke Works in the Pittsburgh area, killing two steelworkers and injuring 10;
- Three workers died on July 30 in an explosion at a Nebraska biofuel plant;
- The July 1 explosion in a fireworks factory in Esparto,

California which killed seven.

The list goes on. Two weeks ago, UPS worker Shelma Reyna Guerrero was crushed to death while loading packages inside a cargo trailer. In July, Brayan Neftali Otoniel Canu Joj was horrifically killed after being pulled into an industrial meat grinder at a Vernon processing plant.

And in April, skilled tradesman Ronald Adams, Jr. was killed at a Detroit area engine plant when an overhead gantry crane unexpectedly engaged in an area where he was working. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committee has launched a rank-and-file investigation into Adams' death, which included a public hearing on July 27.

These are not accidents in any meaningful sense. They are social crimes, predictable outcomes of a deregulated, profit-driven system that treats human lives as expendable. Agencies like Cal/OSHA, chronically underfunded and politically neutered, serve more as public relations shields than enforcers of safety. Companies routinely negotiate down fines, conceal incident reports, and resume production with little more than a slap on the wrist through regulatory capture or by being enmeshed into the government.

The bipartisan political establishment bears direct responsibility. Democrats and Republicans alike have dismantled regulatory agencies, slashed enforcement budgets, and cultivated a business climate that privileges corporate profit over public welfare. California Democrats, despite their rhetorical "green" credentials, are among the worst offenders. Governor Newsom's administration has presided over a staggering rollback of environmental and safety oversight and the El Segundo explosion is merely the latest warning flare.

The Chevron blaze comes amid a sweeping restructuring of California's energy landscape. Major refineries are closing, including Phillips 66's Wilmington and Carson facilities and Valero's Bay Area plant, eliminating thousands of stable jobs and hollowing out entire working-class communities. Together, these closures will erase nearly one-fifth of the state's refining capacity.

The official narrative presents this as a transition toward a "green economy." But in reality, these closures are dictated not by concern for the planet but by shifting profit calculations. Companies shutter older facilities when they are no longer sufficiently lucrative, even if doing so leaves behind environmental devastation, economic blight, and mass unemployment.

The political establishment cynically exploits the crisis. Republicans blame California's sky-high fuel prices on Newsom's climate policies, while Democrats posture as environmental champions. But both parties defend the same fundamental interests: corporate profitability and capitalist property relations.

Newsom's supposed "climate leadership" has been exposed as a fraud. Under pressure from oil companies and amid rising fuel costs, he recently authorized up to 2,000 new oil wells annually through 2036, a decision that overturns years of environmental litigation and guarantees decades more of fossil fuel extraction. Just this week, he also approved the sale of gasoline blended with 15 percent ethanol before safety reviews were completed, a gift to agribusiness and refiners disguised as consumer "relief."

Newsom's accomplices are the trade union bureaucracy, which has failed to challenge the systemic dangers at Chevron. In 2022, the United Steelworkers isolated a strike of Chevron workers in Richmond, California from their El Segundo brothers and sisters and from refinery workers across the country. The USW boasted that its national refinery agreement that year did not contribute to inflation—that is, contained substandard wage increases.

The El Segundo explosion is the latest sign that industrial safety has been stretched to its limits by decades of cost-cutting, deregulation, and profit extraction.

The Chevron explosion is a symptom of the deeper disease of capitalist society, a system that subordinates human life and the planet itself to the insatiable drive for profit. If the working class does not take the reins of society into its own hands, the next "isolated incident" may be a catastrophe from which there is no escape.



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