

El Segundo refinery fire the product of bipartisan dismantling of safety regulations

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On the night of October 2–3, 2025, the Chevron refinery in El Segundo exploded in flames that lit up the sky across the South Bay. Residents described the blast as a “mini-quake”; a vivid red glow bathed the horizon; and the smoke plume could be seen for miles.

Although Chevron claims there were no fatalities, at least one worker was injured. The blaze is now under regulatory and internal scrutiny, with Chevron promising to submit a full failure analysis within 30 days.

Yet this is far from an isolated accident. The fire is the culmination of years of negligence, marked by inadequate oversight and a festering pattern of violations that Chevron has long been allowed to build.

Over the past five years, the El Segundo facility has received 46 notices of violation from the South Coast Air Quality Management District (SCAQMD), 13 of them in just the past year. Common violations involve chemical leaks, malfunctioning or degraded equipment, failure to maintain or repair instrumentation, and exceeding permitted emissions limits.

On the labor and workplace safety side, federal OSHA inspections over the last decade have turned up 17 violations at the refinery. Among them: failure to maintain guardrails and ladderway safety, deficient hazard analyses (especially for chemical leaks and explosion risk), and inattention to heat-illness prevention protocols, all basic requirements in a site handling volatile hydrocarbons. In 2022, OSHA issued a “serious” citation tied to the refinery’s failure to maintain safe practices that might have prevented hazardous releases.

Beyond internal violations, the broader environmental footprint of the facility looms large. A 2023 environmental analysis ranked Chevron El Segundo as the worst among some 80 US refineries for its discharges of nitrogen and selenium into surrounding waters (notably Santa Monica Bay). These pollutants pose chronic hazards: endocrine disruption, carcinogenic risk, damage to marine ecosystems, and cumulative exposure burdens on adjacent communities.

Locally, residents have long complained of sulfurous odors, nausea, headaches, eye and throat

irritation—symptoms common near refineries and chemical plants. The City of El Segundo maintains an “Odor / Environmental Concerns” portal, regularly fielding calls from neighbors who contend that monitoring systems underreport real exposures.

Los Angeles County Department of Public Health concedes that while measured hydrogen sulfide levels at present do not appear to be high enough for long-term harm, they acknowledge that these episodic odors can cause short-term symptoms.

This convergence of environmental and safety failings demonstrates that the October fire was the manifestation of a system that allows the oil and gas industry to defy accountability.

Deregulation, bipartisan attacks, hypocritical “green” politics

Over recent decades, both parties have contributed to the destruction of federal and state oversight. This includes stripping funding, hamstringing agency enforcement powers and rolling back safety standards.

The ongoing Trump administration shutdown is being used to dismantle social programs, including workplace and environmental safety. With large portions of the federal government paralyzed, agencies such as OSHA, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB) have been effectively suspended, leaving critical oversight functions unfunded and unstaffed. Inspections are halted, enforcement actions abandoned, and long-standing investigations shelved.

The very agencies responsible for preventing chemical disasters and workplace deaths are being starved into irrelevance. The cynical posturing of both parties (Republicans openly slashing budgets, Democrats mouthing empty “green” slogans while voting for austerity measures)

has produced a system where the institutions charged with protecting human life have been reduced to hollow shells.

California has long been held up as a model of progressive regulation, but this is a mirage. Under successive Democratic administrations, the state has professed climate ambitions and pollution controls while simultaneously starving regulatory agencies of the resources necessary to enforce them.

Cal/OSHA, the state's workplace safety body, is chronically underfunded, understaffed, and incapable of fulfilling even its most basic mandate: to inspect worksites, enforce rules, and protect vulnerable workers. This was exposed by a recent state audit that spelled out the agency's state of profound decay and dysfunction.

In its review of just 60 case files between 2019 and 2024, the State Auditor found at least 15 instances—including serious injuries and accidents—where Cal/OSHA failed to perform even an on-site inspection.

In practice, inspections are rare, hazard complaints pile up unaddressed, and penalties (when levied) are puny relative to corporate profits.

Likewise, California's air quality agencies such as SCAQMD are constrained by limited budgets and political interference. Despite imposing notices of violation, their capacity to compel corrective action or impose meaningful fines is severely limited. Corporate giants like Chevron can exploit legal and administrative delays, appeal processes, and lax enforcement to drag out compliance indefinitely.

The Democratic Party's performative "green" agenda, featuring cap-and-trade markets, subsidies for corn ethanol, or electric vehicle mandates, masks the fact that in reality regulation to rein in fossil capital has been hollowed out from within.

Governor Gavin Newsom has signed SB 237, granting Kern County authority to rubber-stamp up to 2,000 new oil wells every year until 2036. Cloaked in the language of "fuel stability" and "consumer protection," the legislation is designed to appease corporate energy interests under the guise of environmental pragmatism.

The working class pays the cost

In the calculus of capital, human lives, public health, and the environment are expendable. The working class, especially low-income neighborhoods, are the sacrificial ground.

The conditions in El Segundo are replicated in countless industrial corridors nationwide:

- along Louisiana's "Cancer Alley," with some of the highest cancer rates in the United States due to the dense concentration of petrochemical plants;

- in Houston's Ship Channel, where refineries and chemical complexes emit benzene, formaldehyde, and other carcinogens into surrounding working class neighborhoods;

- in East Chicago, Indiana, where residents still live amid lead and arsenic contamination from decades of industrial dumping;

- in Richmond, California, where Chevron's other massive refinery has repeatedly released toxic smoke and flaring gases over densely populated communities.

Epidemiological studies across the US have shown higher rates of lung, bladder, breast, colon, and lymphatic cancers among residents living within 5–10 miles of refineries (versus those farther away). Such patterns point to the plausibility that decades of low-level emissions, episodic flares, VOC releases, and odor events contribute to cumulative health burdens.

Now, with this fire, the danger is acute. Toxic plumes, including volatile organic compounds (VOCs), sulfur compounds, particulate matter, spread across neighborhoods. But because monitoring is partial and reporting delayed, the precise exposure pathways will remain murky. Chevron reapplys PR assurances; regulators issue perfunctory statements; and the community is left to bear the risk.

This catastrophe underscores the urgent need to resurrect regulatory authority not as a tool of capitalist consent but as an instrument of workers' power and community defense. Only through the independent mobilization of the working class, demanding direct control, transparent enforcement, investigations, and systemic transformation, can tragedies like this be prevented.

The time is more than ripe to build a movement that demands social ownership of energy, environmental protection, and unfettered power for workers and communities to govern the industries that threaten their lives.



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