

# Massive fire at 1 of Australia's 2 remaining oil refineries

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A massive explosion and fire tore through Viva Energy's Geelong oil refinery late Wednesday night, resulting in a conflagration that took firefighters some 13 hours to extinguish. Around 50 workers were on site when the blaze erupted. All escaped without injury, but some were forced to literally run for their lives, according to media reports.

Shortly before midnight on Wednesday, operators in the MOGAS (motor gasoline) section of the plant noticed a drop in pressure on their control boards and raised the alarm, but before they could investigate, there was a large explosion.

Tony Hynds, Geelong organiser for the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), noted that the lack of casualties was only an accident of timing: "If this had happened during the day, we'd be talking about a whole different outcome in terms of injuries and fatalities."

The fire produced a massive plume of smoke that spread across Geelong, with local residents warned to stay indoors, close doors and windows and turn off heating and air-conditioning systems.

Extraordinarily, while Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) officials identified a "mechanical or engineering failure" of the plant as the likely cause, the refinery remains operational, with only a small section taken offline.

The refinery, one of only two remaining in the country, produces petrol, diesel, LPG, jet fuel and avgas. It supplies roughly half of Victoria's petrol and about 10 percent of national fuel supplies. Representatives of management and the federal Labor government rushed to downplay the impact of the blast on fuel availability, emphasising the partial character of the shutdown.

However, its significance, amid a global fuel supply crisis resulting from the US-led war of aggression against Iran, is undeniable. This was underscored by Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's immediate return to

Australia from South East Asia, where he was seeking to shore up future fuel import deals, to deliver a press conference at the Geelong site on Friday.

Albanese insisted the incident had only caused a "slight slowdown" in production at the refinery and "will not lead to any change" in Australia's four-stage fuel security policy. This was echoed by Viva Energy CEO Scott Wyatt, who declared, "we're still producing, making about 80 percent of diesel and 60 percent of petrol. We do hope to be able to lift that over the coming weeks."

Wyatt claimed "we can run this facility close to full production without those two units" and that the company was investigating how it could "operate the site for an extended period of time as close to full production as we possibly can get."

Wyatt denied there had been a ramping up of production in response to the Iran war, telling reporters the recent increase in output at the refinery was simply because it had returned to "normal operations" after completing a "five-yearly maintenance plan."

But the fact that Viva's immediate response to what could have easily been a catastrophic mass casualty accident is to try to rejig its operations to achieve full production even before the damaged sections of the plant are repaired would seem to be starkly at odds with the "safety first" picture Wyatt sought to paint.

The financial context is unambiguous: As the Iran war has tightened fuel supply, refining margins have surged. The Albanese government's March 2026 enhancement of the Fuel Security Services Payment (FSSP) subsidy scheme—lifting per-litre rates and extending the program to 2030—was explicitly designed to keep the refinery producing at maximum levels. Viva's share price surged in March on the combination of higher profit margins and expanded government support.

Bill Patterson, Viva's general manager of energy and infrastructure, admitted Thursday that some maintenance

had been postponed in March, but claimed it “didn’t relate to the integrity of equipment on the site,” and that “There wasn’t a link between any delays of maintenance and this event that we know of.”

This attempt to shield the company from responsibility for the explosion in fact reveals that decisions about maintenance at the refinery are being made on the basis of keeping production and profits flowing during a supply shortage and points to the possibility of future malfunctions, with potentially lethal consequences.

Experts have raised concerns over the age of the plant, which opened in 1956. Yuan Chen, from the School of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering at the University of Sydney, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, “Oil refining is inherently a high-temperature, high-risk industrial process.... These operating conditions, combined with the potential for equipment degradation over time, can increase the likelihood of incidents such as fires if not carefully managed through maintenance and safety systems.”

Speaking to reporters, Hynds painted a grim picture of conditions in the plant: “You walk around that place and you see some of the rusty shit around there and you think how can this be? Look at the rust on that. Look at the condition of the concrete foundations.”

The union official noted, “There’s been incidents there of leaks over the years because it’s an old place.” But he then leapt to the company’s defence, noting, “They run on very small margins. They are up against international refineries where wages and conditions are a lot less.”

In other words, Hynds is saying that Viva cannot be held responsible for the consequences of their decrepit facilities and deferred maintenance, because providing safe working conditions would threaten their profits and international competitiveness. He is also effectively telling workers that improvements to safety and maintenance would have to be paid for through cuts to their wages, conditions and even jobs.

Incredibly, given the massive explosion hours earlier, Hynds claimed maintenance and safety at the refinery was getting better: “Some years ago... it was a big concern, and we had numerous incidents, it was shocking really, but in the last five to six years it’s certainly improved.”

Hynds was not only providing cover for the company’s track record on safety, but that of the AMWU, Australian Workers Union (AWU) and Electrical Trades Union (ETU), which have presided over the 70-year-old plant’s history of leaks, safety breaches, and regulatory prosecutions.

In November and December 2017, the refinery suffered two separate leaks of hydrofluoric acid—one of the most hazardous substances used in petroleum processing—exposing workers to toxic vapour. WorkSafe Victoria responded by laying 11 occupational health and safety charges against the company in 2018, including failing to provide safe systems of work, adequate training, and safe plant, and for failing to properly notify the regulator of a serious incident.

In 2020, a pipeline leak allowed oil to escape into the environment near the Geelong foreshore. In 2023, a contractor’s crane dropped a compressor during planned maintenance works—a serious near-miss in a facility defined as a major hazard site.

The refinery has also been the scene of repeated large flares, power-related upsets causing uncontrolled releases, and persistent foul-odour incidents that have alarmed surrounding communities. Union records list multiple worker injuries—burns, chemical exposures, fractures—during routine operations and turnaround maintenance.

The claim that this track record has suddenly changed “in the last five to six years” is starkly exposed as a fraud by Wednesday night’s explosion. As Hynds himself noted, if the leak had occurred during day shift, it could easily have been a mass casualty event.

The fact that Hynds has stepped in to defend the company illustrates the role played by the trade union bureaucracy in every industry. It is on their watch that an average of 191 workers are killed on the job each year in Australia.

These are not random tragedies but the result of the systematic subordination of safety to profit under capitalism. The union bureaucracies will not lead a fight for workplace safety, because they are themselves an integral component of the capitalist system and serve as an industrial police force of management.



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