INVESTIGATE THE BP HUSKY REFINERY DEATHS AND HALT THE CARNAGE IN AMERICA'S WORKPLACES



BY WILL LEHMAN
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As candidate for president of the United Auto Workers, I call on my brothers and sisters to take a stand with me to fight unsafe and deadly conditions in America's workplaces and the ongoing sacrifice of our health and lives for corporate profit.

In opposition to the coverup of industrial injuries and deaths by the corporations, government safety regulators and the union bureaucracies, I call for independent investigations by rank-and-file workers to uncover the truth and hold accountable all those responsible for the ongoing carnage in America's workplaces.

Last week, hundreds of family members, friends and co-workers held a memorial for Ben and Max Morrissey, who were killed in the September 20 fire at the BP Husky oil refinery in Oregon, Ohio. The two brothers, just 32 and 34, left behind wives and small children whose lives will be forever changed by this tragedy.

Friends and family mourn the death of Max and Ben Morrissey, picture right, at the celebration of life ceremony in Oregon, Ohio on Thursday, September 29, 2022

After the deaths, BP issued a perfunctory statement expressing its "deep sadness," and declaring, "Our highest priority remains the safety of our staff, the responders and the public."

In fact, BP has a notorious record of sacrificing workers' lives for corporate profit. In 2005, 15 workers were killed and another 180 injured in an explosion at its Texas City refinery. Investigators found that managers were pressuring workers to increase output and cut costs. In 2010, the BP Deepwater Horizon explosion killed 11 workers and caused a massive environmental disaster. Again, investigators found that cost-cutting contributed to the disaster.

Workers at BP-Husky and other refineries have long complained that job cuts, exhausting hours, the contracting out of jobs, the lack of maintenance and repair work and the constant pressure for higher production are creating deadly conditions. But the United Steelworkers bureaucracy has blocked any serious struggle by workers, including a strike by 30,000 refinery workers earlier this year. The USW operates joint labor-management safety committees, which constantly bow to profit concerns.

In response to the deadly explosion at the Toledo refinery, top USW officials have warned workers "not to rush to judgment."

As every worker knows, these deadly conditions are not confined to the oil industry.

On July 9, 22-year-old Casen Garcia died while working in extremely dangerous conditions in the rendering basement at the Tyson Foods meatpacking plant in Joslin, Illinois. Tyson is covering up how he died, but Casen's family has spoken to numerous coworkers who say that he was electrocuted by faulty machinery, and that management rejected his calls for help and prevented workers from saving his life to keep production going.

"My son was treated like he was one of the livestock," his mother Allison declared.

The factories, refineries and other workplaces in the US would better be described as "America's industrial slaughterhouse." To the American ruling class, the lives of workers are cheap. If we are crippled or killed, they will simply get another worker to fill in for us. Production and profits must keep flowing, no matter what.

According to the "Death on the Job" report, released by the AFL-CIO in April 2022:

- Every day in the United States, 340 workers die from hazardous workplace conditions. In 2020, more than 4,700 workers were killed on the job, and an estimated 120,000 died from occupational diseases due to exposure to toxic materials at work.

- Nearly 3.2 million work-related injuries and illnesses were reported in 2020. Because of workplace intimidation, the true toll of work-related injuries and illnesses is far larger, totaling between 5.4 million and 8.1 million annually.
- There are only 1,700 Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) inspectors for 10.4 million workplaces, or one inspector for every 81,427 workers in the US.
- The median federal OSHA penalty for a worker's death is $9,753 and only $5,825 for state penalties. Only 115 worker death cases have been criminally prosecuted under OSHA since its establishment in 1970.

These figures do not include the hundreds of thousands of workers killed by COVID-19 and the millions more who are suffering the lingering disabilities of Long COVID. A ruling class that can allow 1.1 million people to die during the pandemic could not care less about the tens of thousands crushed, burnt to death, poisoned and mangled in its profit-making enterprises.

Autoworkers know this firsthand. Steven Dierkes, a 39-year-old worker died instantly after falling into a molten iron crucible at the Caterpillar foundry in Mapleton, Illinois, on June 2. Travis Baker, a 49-year-old autoworker and father of four sons, died on August 18 after being injured at the Stellantis plant in Belvidere, Illinois.

At least three of my co-workers at the Mack Trucks plant in Macungie, Pennsylvania, died of COVID-19. Catherine Pace, a Stellantis worker about to retire in Detroit, was one of more than a dozen workers who succumbed to the deadly disease at the Warren Truck plant alone.

In the early days of the pandemic, workers had to take matters into their own hands and carry out wildcat strikes, in defiance of the UAW bureaucracy, to force the shutdown of the global auto industry. But UAW officials like my opponents Ray Curry and Shawn Fain worked with the auto bosses to restart production as soon as possible. Now, in the third year of the pandemic, the corporations and the Biden administration have dispensed with mask mandates and any measures to protect workers, even as a new Fall surge of COVID-19 is upon us.

In my campaign, I have called for the abolition of the UAW apparatus and the transfer of power to workers on the shop floor through the formation of rank-and-file committees. A key function of these committees will be to exchange information and organize collective action, including the shutdown of production if workers deem that conditions are unsafe. The rights of workers, including the right to a safe and healthy workplace, must take precedence over the profit interests of big business.

These committees, working in conjunction with health and safety experts committed to the working class, must conduct independent investigations into the deaths of workers, including the Morrissey brothers in Ohio, and prevent more coverups by the union bureaucracies, OSHA and the companies.

Ultimately, the fight to defend workers' lives directly poses the need for the working class to take control of the energy and other giant industries and convert them into public utilities, collectively owned and democratically controlled by the workers who produce society's wealth, as part of the socialist transformation of the economy in the US and throughout the world.

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Get involved with the rank-and-file campaign in the UAW elections.

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