

Refinery explosion in Washington state kills three, wounds four

By Tom Eley
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A Friday morning explosion and fire at the Tesoro Corporation oil refinery in Washington state has killed three workers and left critically injured four more. The names of those killed and injured have not yet been released.

The explosion took place at 12:30 a.m. in Anacortes, a town of 15,000 located on the Puget Sound island of Fidalgo about 70 miles north of Seattle and 50 miles south of Vancouver. According to a Tesoro spokesman, the blast occurred while maintenance work was being performed on the refinery's unit that produces naphtha, a highly volatile compound produced during the distillation of petroleum.

The cause of the blast is under investigation. Tesoro was fined \$85,700 a year ago by the State of Washington for 17 deadly safety and health violations at the plant, which employees about 300. In all, 150 violations were discovered. The company appealed the fines.

The four workers injured in the fire were airlifted to Seattle and are reported in critical condition, with severe burns covering most of their bodies. A spokesman for Harborview Medical Center in Seattle, where they are being treated, said that they were two women, ages 29 and 36, and two men, ages 34 and 41.

The force of the explosion sent windblown flames miles through the night sky and rattled homes some five miles away. "My house shook, big time," Lisa Wooding told local station KOMO-TV. "There were flames. First high, then low to the ground and broad." Firefighters contained the fire within 90 minutes.

Tesoro is a Texas-based oil refiner, and the 91st largest US corporation, according to Forbes, boasting revenues of \$28 billion in 2008. Its Anacortes refinery has capacity to refine 120,000 barrels of crude oil per day that it receives from pipeline and by ship from

Alaska and Canada. It caters its products primarily to markets in the Pacific Northwest. Naphtha, which appears to have been the substance that exploded, is a byproduct of the refining process used in plastics, paints, and high-octane gasoline.

Tesoro CEO Bruce A. Smith was paid nearly \$9 million in 2008, and had an estimated net worth of over \$47 million, according to the executive compensation website Equilar. Just over a month ago he sold 218,892 shares of company stock for an estimated \$2,638,000.

There have been a number of fatal explosions and deadly incidents at refinery and petrochemical plants in recent years. Four years ago, a BP refinery in Texas City exploded, killing 15 workers and injuring 180 more. Four workers were killed at a Houston refinery in a crane collapse in July 2008. A refinery explosion in Artesia, New Mexico, earlier in March killed two workers.

While the cause of the Anacortes explosion has not been determined, America's petrochemical and refining industries operate with woefully inadequate regulation and oversight. Significantly, the US Chemical Safety Board announced that it would not even investigate this month's fatal explosion in New Mexico "because of a shortage of manpower due to several continuing investigations," according to Reuters. This was Tesoro's second factory fire in seven months, following a non-fatal blaze at a Salt Lake City, Utah, plant in October.

There may be another factor at play in recent workplace injuries and deaths. A feature of the current crisis is its sharp increase in worker productivity. Employers are wringing more production out of fewer employees in fewer laboring hours rather than hiring new workers, a process that used to be known as "sweating." There has long been a clear link between

driving workers, and workplace injuries and deaths.

Whatever triggered the blast, the families of those killed and maimed, as well as the small town of Anacortes, have suffered a severe loss.

This grieving is not shared by financial interests, which immediately sized up the tragedy for its impact on prices and profits. “For the units involved in the fire, that could be several weeks,” speculated Andy Lipow, president of the Lipow Oil Associates LLC, a Houston-based consulting company. “In the Pacific Northwest, prices are liable to rise.” Gasoline prices at the pump increased in the Seattle area by 3 cents, according to motorist association AAA.

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