

Five missing after Oklahoma drilling rig explosion

By Matthew Taylor
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A natural gas drilling rig in Quinton, Oklahoma exploded on Monday morning, about 100 miles southeast of Tulsa. The explosion collapsed the derrick surrounding the well site, and the flames sent plumes of black smoke into the sky. Twenty-two workers were reportedly on site at the time of the blast. Seventeen were removed, with one medivacked to a nearby hospital to be treated for burns, and five workers remain unaccounted for at the time of this writing.

The explosion at the well, owned by Oklahoma City-based Red Mountain Energy, occurred at 8:45 in the morning. Emergency workers were withdrawn from the scene after fires spread to nearby tanks and other equipment. Monday's explosion marks the second oil-related accident in Oklahoma this year, following the February 2017 fire at a drilling site in the same area that injured one worker.

Pittsburgh County Emergency management director Kevin Enloe told the media that a remote switch designed to close the well in the event of an emergency was destroyed in the explosion, leaving authorities unable to close off the well. According to an Associated Press report at 8 pm Monday night, the gas-fueled fire at the well head and surrounding areas had been put out, but fire crews remained at the scene in case the rig reignited. No access to the rig was being allowed.

The Red Mountain Energy gas rig was operated by Houston-based Patterson UTI Drilling Company. In an official statement Monday, Patterson-UTI said some of its employees "are unaccounted for at this time" and that the cause of the fire remains unknown.

Patterson UTI operates 166 drilling rigs in the US and Canada, and several in the Middle East. Over the past several years, the company has been cited by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration

(OSHA) for dozens of safety violations.

As with other drilling operations, the fines handed out for these violations are minor, ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars. The fines are often reduced or eliminated in subsequent appeals. For Patterson UTI, which generates revenues in excess of two billion dollars per year, the fines are a negligible cost of doing business.

Included amongst Patterson's many citations are several incidents which led to the deaths of workers. In January of 2012, a North Carolina worker was killed in a boiler explosion on a Patterson-operated rig. In 2011 workers in New Mexico and Texas died after being struck by equipment, with the worker in Texas falling 26 feet to his death. In 2006 in Oklahoma two workers were injured and another killed when they were crushed by falling drilling equipment. The company was given a \$5,000 fine for the worker's death.

According to the company's website the wage for new floor hands, the most common position, start at \$22 an hour plus benefits and a per diem. For this meager wage, workers are subjected to mandatory overtime, dangerous working conditions (lethal in some cases), and job security that is directly linked to the global price of oil, which even in periods of stability is subject to the geopolitical needs of the capitalist class.

For many workers, especially those in historically low-wage regions like Oklahoma and North Dakota, these jobs are the only available employment above the poverty level. This creates a desperate situation for oil workers who wish to organize to improve their conditions and wages. A packed jobs fair was recently held in Oklahoma City.

The unsafe working conditions at Patterson-operated rigs have been noted by many of their employees. One worker with three years' experience in the oil industry

noted on Glassdoor.com "...Went fine until I got hurt on a rig, management didn't follow proper protocol and tried to cover it up. I filed for worker's comp and HR told me I was automatically separated after 24 days and would have to start from the beginning--reapply, go in for another interview (I live out of state), the whole shebang. When I asked to see the policy I got radio silence...I'm a combat veteran with an excellent work ethic, and I've seen more professionalism from the Taliban in Iraq/Afghanistan."

Another worker stated that employees were "constantly searching for tools to do jobs, learn positions on the fly because there is no formal training to move up to other jobs, they take money from you whenever they want, moving up depends on how much butt you kiss, don't seem to care about the rig hands at all, clothing ordered on the website is cheap and boots are garbage, bonuses and other money were taken from us...Give us the dollar back per hour you took and bring back per diem to \$51/day like it used to be, not the \$35 you cut us down to, quit worrying more about your shareholders than your rig hands who make you the real money and are the backbone of this company."

The company particularly targets returning soldiers. Recruit Military, a website for military veterans seeking jobs, states, "Patterson-UTI has a history of recruiting veterans. The company has hired an in-house manager of recruiting with prior military status to help initiate a strategy for recruiting veterans. Patterson-UTI reaches out to 14 military installations nationwide to source candidates as they are exiting the military. The company is also a partner of the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve and the Employer Partnership of the Armed Forces. The company's goal is to have veterans make up 40 percent or more of the new hires for its New 2 Industry Training Program."

After surviving the bloody military invasions and occupations around the world, these veterans now face death at home.

The explosion in Oklahoma comes at a time of rising workplace deaths in the US. According to a report released in December of last year by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, total workplace fatalities in 2016 (the last year full data is available) were 5,190, up seven percent from the previous year, and the third straight year of increasing fatalities. Oil and gas extraction workers accounted for 91 of these fatalities.

The explosion occurs only weeks after the Trump administration moved to roll back regulations on off-shore oil drilling implemented in the wake of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill that killed eleven workers. These include third-party inspections of safety equipment, live streaming of offshore drilling information to onshore regulators, and a whole host of practices known as the "well rule" that regulate all aspects of offshore drilling. The administration also opened areas off both coasts of the US that have been off limits to the energy companies for decades.

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