

Fatal refinery, mine blasts sadden, outrage unions

Five union Steelworkers killed in explosion and fire April 2 at Tesoro Corp. in Anacortes, Wash.

PITTSBURGH (PAI) — Fatal explosions at a refinery in Washington state and a coal mine in West Virginia saddened and outraged unions, which sent help for hurting families and investigative teams to the two sites while criticizing the companies involved for putting profits before people.

The first explosion and fire occurred on April 2 at the Tesoro petroleum refinery in Anacortes, Wash. The blast killed three operators: Matthew C. Bowen, 31, of Arlington; Darrin J. Hoines, 43, of Ferndale; and Daniel J. Aldridge, 50, of Anacortes. Operators Kathryn Powell, 28, of Burlington, and Donna VanDreumel, 36, of Oak Harbor, died of their burns later at the hospital.

All were members of United Steelworkers Local 12-591, a former Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers local. Steelworker Matt Gumbel, 34, and supervisor Lew Janz, 41, a former union member, were severely burned and hospitalized in severe and critical condition.

The second explosion, on April 6 at the nonunion Massey Coal Co., mine in Whitesville, W. Va., killed 29 miners.

Both the Steelworkers and the United Mine Workers (UMWA) dispatched investigative teams to the sites, even though Massey's management is aggressively anti-union and even though the Upper Big Branch mine in

West Virginia operates nonunion.

"This is a very difficult time for the families, friends and co-workers of these employees as well as for the entire work force at the refinery. Our thoughts and our prayers go out to them," said Steelworkers President Leo Gerard after the Tesoro explosion and fire. "Kathryn Powell and Donna VanDreumel were true Women of Steel." Powell was born in Portland, but moved with her family to Mount Vernon in 1984. She had worked for the company for two years. VanDreumel is a nine-year employee who leaves behind a husband and two children, ages 6 and 10.

"It is obvious this industry still has not learned from other refinery disasters and near-misses," said Steelworkers Vice President Gary Beevers, who heads the union's oil sector. "They are more concerned with their image than taking appropriate action on safety."

His comments were prompted by industry lobbies citing the oil firms' safety record. "The hearts and prayers of all UMWA members are with the families of those lost at Upper Big Branch," said Mine Workers President Cecil Roberts. "We are all brothers and sisters in the coalfields at times like this." The union pledged to help the miners' families, besides dispatching the investigators.

But unionists and federal officials also didn't hesitate to point out the companies put profits first, by disregarding safety. Massey, the huge coal company that owns Upper Big Branch,

was fined just last year for inadequate ventilation and safety equipment at that mine. According to Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) records, since 1995, Massey's Upper Big Branch-South Mine has been cited for 3,007 safety violations. The company is contesting 353 violations, and 127 are delinquent.

Last year alone, MSHA proposed \$382,000 in fines against Massey mines — a small percentage of the company's \$2.69 billion in 2009 revenue and \$297.5 million in profits.

Massey's appalling record led AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, a former United Mine Workers president, to slam the company. "This incident isn't just a matter of happenstance, but rather the inevitable result of a profit-driven system and reckless corporate conduct. Many mining companies have given too little attention to safety over the years and too much to the bottom line."

"Massey Mine, and its CEO, Donald Blankenship, have been cited for over 450 safety violations in this mine. Massey paid over \$1 million in fines in the past year alone — and failed to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars more in fines it is contesting. Blankenship's attitude towards workers is showcased in a memo addressing safety concerns ... He told his superintendents to put coal production first because, 'This memo is necessary only because we seem not to understand that the coal pays the bills.'"

The Steelworkers had sharp words for Tesoro's safety lapses.

The National Petrochemical and Refiners Association "brags the industry has a lower injury rate than the U.S. manufacturing sector as a whole," Gerard noted. "It's incredible this industry brags about its safety record just after five people were killed in a refinery explosion."

"The recordable injury rates OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) collects" — and that refiners cite — "measure items like slips, falls, sprains and fractures, not poor safety practices that lead to explosions and fires. There's a difference between a sprained ankle and an explosion that kills five people," Gerard said.

Steelworkers refinery safety expert Kim Nibarger, who is heading the union's investigative team at Tesoro, added he "sat on a committee with representatives from the oil companies for months and we all agreed that OSHA injury rates were not a measure of re-

finery safety and that data should not be used, yet the American Petroleum Institute (the oil companies' lobby) keeps publicly bringing up these injury rates whenever there is an accident.

"It makes me think they are more concerned with the industry's image than they are with fixing the problems," Nibarger added.

The chair of the U.S. Chemical Safety Board, John Bresland, also criticized the safety record of the entire oil industry. "The CSB has 18 ongoing investigations. Of those, seven occurred at refineries. This is a significant and disturbing trend the refining industry needs to address immediately," he said.

Local 12-591 has set up a "Tesoro Incident Family Fund." Contributions can be sent to the Tesoro Federal Credit Union, P.O. Box 248, Anacortes, WA 98221; USW Local 12-591, P.O. Box 483, Anacortes, WA 98221; or call 360-293-6541.

Massey CEO politically connected

According to the Progress Report blog, Massey Corp. CEO Donald Blankenship is not just a coal baron, he's also a right-wing activist millionaire who sits on the boards of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Mining Association. He's "a highly active GOP fundraiser and bankroller who is known for his outspoken opposition to labor unions."

Blankenship's closeness to prominent Republicans helped him land allies at the highest levels of the federal mine safety system during the Bush Administration.

In October 2006, after being rejected twice by the Senate, President Bush put one-time Massey executive Dick Stickler in charge of the Mine Safety and Health Administration by a recess appointment. Prior to that, Massey COO Stanley Suboleski was

named a commissioner of the Federal Mine Safety and Health Review Commission in 2003.

According to the Progress Report, in October 2000, after a coal slurry impoundment broke through an underground mine shaft and spilled over 300 million gallons of black, toxic sludge into Coldwater Creek and Wolf Creek at Massey-owned Martin County Coal in Kentucky, then-U. S. Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao "put the brakes" on an agency investigation by placing a staffer to her husband, Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY), in charge.

In 2002, a Labor Department judge levied a \$5,600 fine. In September 2002, Massey's political action committee gave \$100,000 to the National Republican Senatorial Committee, which McConnell had previously chaired.

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