

# TESORO REFINERY Explosion Kills 7

INVESTIGATION UNDERWAY;  
USW VOWS TO FIGHT FOR JUSTICE

**K**im Nibarger had just arrived at his parents' house in Anacortes, Wash., for an Easter visit when the USW health and safety specialist heard, through closed windows, the muffled sounds of an explosion – a deep whoop, whooop.

It was almost 12:30 a.m. on Good Friday, April 2. Nibarger stepped out on the porch and heard sirens coming from the Tesoro refinery about five miles away. He jumped in a car to get a closer look.

"I knew immediately what it was," said Nibarger, a former USW local union

president who once worked as a chief operator at an adjacent refinery in Anacortes that is operated by Shell.

By dawn's light, it was clear that a massive explosion at Tesoro had immediately killed three USW-represented workers and injured four other workers. Within three weeks, all seven would be dead from their injuries.

The explosion shook houses for miles around and sent flames darting into the sky. Some people thought it sounded like a jet engine; others described a boom and loud wind.

## Felt like an earthquake

Lisa Wooding, who lives a mile away, told reporters that her windows rattled and her whole house shook like it was in an earthquake.

"I looked over at the refineries, and you could see big flames coming out," she said. "There was black smoke and what appeared to be like red embers in the air ..."

It was the worst refinery accident in terms of lives lost since the March 23, 2005 explosion at the BP refinery in Texas City, Texas, killed 15 contract workers and injured 170 others.

The three operators killed immediately in the Tesoro blast and fire were Matthew C. Bowen, 31; Darrin J. Hoines, 43, and Daniel J. Aldridge, 50. Operators Kathryn Powell, 29, and Donna Van Dreumel, 36, were the fourth and fifth victims to die.

Lew Janz, 41, a supervisor who had been a long-time member of the union, died on April 13 while hospitalized. Matt Gumbel, 34, died April 24 after a skin graft operation.

Investigations are being conducted by the USW, the U.S. Chemical Safety Board and the Washington state Department of Labor and Industries, among other agencies.

## ERT on the scene

Nibarger was on the scene from the start. The USW's Emergency Response Team (ERT) was alerted that morning and immediately began to work with Local 12-591 President Joe Solomon to provide counseling, legal referrals and other assistance to the victims, their families and co-workers.

Refinery accident investigations are very personal for Nibarger. In this case, even more so because the victims of the Tesoro blast, some of whom he knew, were members of his home local union.

In 1998, he was part of a team of volunteers who respectfully removed the bodies of six co-workers killed in an explosion and fire at the adjacent Equilon Puget Sound Refinery in Anacortes, now operated by Shell.

It will likely take some time for investigators to fully understand what happened at Tesoro in Anacortes. The investigation by the U.S. Chemical Safety Board (CSB) into the 2005 BP explosion, its largest probe ever, took two years to complete.

“They were and always will be my union brothers and sisters.”

Local 12-591 President Joe Solomon

The most dangerous time for a refinery generally isn't when it is running, but when it is in transition, say bringing a unit back on line after service or repairs.

The Tesoro explosion took place at a heat exchanger that is part of a naphtha hydrotreater, which removes sulfur from low-octane naphtha as it is converted to a high-octane additive for gasoline.

The catastrophic failure apparently involved an operating heat exchanger located next to a heat exchanger that was being serviced and brought back on line.

## Too many workers on site

Although the investigation is far from complete, Nibarger said it appears that there were too many people in the blast area – some observing for training purposes. After BP, the CSB recommended that only essential personnel be involved in equipment startups.

The debris footprint at the accident site was relatively small. "So you know that whatever happened, it happened real quick," Nibarger said.

The BP disaster five years earlier got the attention of the entire nation and led to calls for major reforms in refinery safety that largely went unheeded.

Yet dangerous incidents and near-misses continue unabated. Severe incidents have occurred at 5 percent of U.S. refineries in the last two years, said Robert Hall, the CSB investigation supervisor for the Tesoro accident. Of 18 active CSB investigations, seven of them are at refineries.

"It's a trend we're looking to stop," Hall said.

Last year, the industry self-reported almost 50 fires in refineries throughout the United States, nearly one a week and any of them could have led to a disaster.

Nibarger believes the reported number is only a fraction of the actual incidents. "People have to realize that potentially disastrous events are occurring in these plants all the time," Nibarger said. "It's a much bigger problem than most people realize."

## Local organized memorial

A memorial organized by Local 12-591 for the Tesoro victims drew more than 800 mourners including family,

friends and union members. Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire, U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, U.S. Rep. Rick Larsen and International Vice President Gary Beevers were among those present.

Seven wreaths and seven large photos of the victims graced the stage at the Anacortes high school during the memorial. A representative of each of the families shared stories and their grief.

Local 12-591 President Solomon expressed the sentiments of many USW members. "They were and always will be my union brothers and sisters," he said. "We love you; we miss you; and we will never forget you."

Beevers, who heads the USW's National Oil Bargaining program, read a brief statement of condolence from International President Leo W. Gerard.

"These brave men and women paid the ultimate price doing what we take pride in doing every day: going to work to earn an honest living to support our families and our communities," Beevers said.

In his letter, Gerard told mourners that the best honor we can give their loved ones is to "fight like hell so that their deaths and injuries are not in vain."

"Please know that this union – with every ounce of its being – is working day and night for justice and more importantly, for solutions so that tragedies like this never happen again," he said.

Four days later, on Workers' Memorial Day, Nibarger read the names of the fallen seven as the union paid tribute to those who died on the job in the previous year. With each name, a bell was rung and a candle extinguished.

SPECIAL ISSUE  
ON WORKPLACE SAFETY

