

British steel firm fined over Yemeni worker's death

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The following article was submitted by a WSWs reader.

A case recently before the courts in Sheffield, England has drawn attention once again to poor safety conditions in parts of the steel industry and to the plight of vulnerable groups of workers.

Immigrant workers from the Yemen form a significant community in Sheffield. Many were employed in the city's formerly large steel industry in the 1950s and 60s, but they had little support or recognition from the official labour movement.

Steelworker Ali Quassim, 63, was crushed to death under tonnes of hot metal bars in the heat treatment shop at a Sheffield factory in November 1998. A prosecution brought by the Health & Safety Executive has just concluded with the company, Special Steels Ltd, being fined £20,000 for breach of the general duties of the 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act, and £5,000 for failing to carry out risk assessments. On both counts these were the maximum available to the Magistrates Court, with the addition of costs of nearly £20,000. The company's profit last year was £800,000.

The Stipendiary Magistrate decided not to exercise his power to refer the case to the Crown Court, which can impose unlimited fines. The company apparently had a clean record. Closer inspection reveals a more complex picture, which does not reflect well on the industry as a whole.

Special Steels, with premises in Bessemer Road, Sheffield, is a subsidiary of Special Steel Co. with premises in Bacon Lane about half a mile away. The latter was the scene of a fatal accident when Qasim Nasser, 44, was crushed between a furnace charging machine and a loading table in June 1988. Apparently he was in a "blind spot" and was not seen by the operator. Subsequently, there was an improvement

notice served and a fine of £3,500 was imposed in the Crown Court. Legally, the two companies would be considered separate undertakings responsible only for their own premises, so these facts relating to Special Steel Co. would not have been introduced in the recent case against its subsidiary.

The *Observer* newspaper of January 15, 1989 reported on the results of an investigation of the Bacon Lane premises and found a catalogue of safety problems, including slippery floors, dangerous machinery, long hours, poor supervision and a run of accidents in the period leading up to the death of Mr. Nasser. The Managing Director, Alan Beardshaw, at the time defended his company's safety record and described the run of accidents as an unfortunate coincidence. He had just appointed a full-time safety officer and said he was looking forward to winning a British Safety Council Award.

Following the death of Ali Qassim, Beardshaw (described in the *Sheffield Star* as Special Steels group chairman), told the Magistrates' Court that the company was the "most pro-active company in Sheffield" in terms of safety. He listed some improvements that had been made, but admitted that risk assessments had not been recorded (a legal requirement).

The reaction of the company to Ali Qassim's death, who died while working with a broken transfer table, was to dismiss two of his colleagues who had left work early. The table had been broken for some time, although it is not clear what role this played in the accident. At the inquest in January 1999 it was claimed that the accident could have been prevented if the two men had stayed at work, but a Health and Safety Executive inspector pointed out that this might have led to two deaths rather than one.

The inquest was told that it was common practice for

the Yemeni workers employed in the heat treatment plant to work up to 13 hours a shift, often for seven days a week, and to work an 18-hour shift on Sundays. Ali Qassim started work at noon on Sunday and his body was found at 6 a.m. on Monday morning. Such was the lack of supervision that he could have been dead under 20 tonnes of hot steel bars for seven hours. The Coroner had expressed astonishment at the long hours and the Magistrate said the situation at the company was “obviously hazardous” and there was a “culture of lax management”.

“Conditions are terrible but what can we do?” These words of a Yemeni worker after the 1988 accident sum up the mood of many at the steelworks. After the most recent fatality, a worker claimed they were treated like slaves and told to “do the job or get sacked”.

What is clear from the experience of the steel industry is that Yemeni workers are a particularly vulnerable group, whose interests are overlooked both by the employers and the trade unions. Qasim Nasser and Ali Qassim came to Sheffield at the end of the 1950s along with thousands of other Yemenis at a time when the steel industry needed labour. They worked long hours for low pay to help their families. In 1988 Qasim Nasser's family could not afford to attend his funeral. In 1998 the family of Ali Qassim could not get a visa.



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