

Britain: Two die and thirteen injured in Corus steel plant explosion

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On November 8 at around 5.00pm, an explosion occurred in one of two furnaces at the Corus Steelworks in Port Talbot, South Wales. The furnaces produce molten iron in the initial phase of steel production. For as yet unexplained reasons, hundreds of tons of white-hot metal punched a hole in the structure.

Local residents said they heard a series of around five bangs. These explosions inside the furnace ignited the gases emitting from the top of the furnace, starting a fire. At the same time, molten iron escaped from the base of the furnace and spread rapidly across the cast house floor. Workers ran for their lives as a river of liquid metal at 1,100C's ignited everything in its path.

Two workers died in the blast—Stephen Galsworthy 26, a steelworks team leader and 20-year-old Andrew Hutin, both from Port Talbot. A further 13 employees were injured in the incident. Seven were placed in intensive care at Morriston hospital, Swansea, which houses Europe's biggest burns unit. Six workers were still on life support machines on Sunday. All victims are suffering varying degrees of burns to their skin, lungs and windpipes, caused by inhaling hot gases. Some are believed to have lost more than half the skin on their body. Others suffered broken bones after being thrown through the air.

It is expected to take at least two weeks before the affected area has cooled enough for accident investigators to begin work.

Immediately following the explosion voices were raised about the safety of the blast furnace known as Number 5. Alun Cairns, a Conservative Party member of the Welsh Assembly, whose 58-year-old father has worked as a welder at the plant for 30 years, said: "I have spoken to a number of employees at the plant who said the furnace has been a constant talking point. There had been claims from within the Port Talbot

plant that the blast furnace needed relining. Recently, workers said they had been surprised that senior management thought the furnace could last another two years before it needed relining."

Industry sources said workers' concerns over the state of furnace No 5 had been allayed by management, who reviewed the condition of the structure last month while carrying out routine maintenance on the 12-year-old furnace. Management insisted, "one or two improvements in the coming years" would be sufficient to keep the furnace going until 2005, when it would be relined. A spokesman for Corus said the condition of the furnace was "so good" that there seemed to be no need to take it out of commission.

Last year four steelworkers died in accidents at Corus plants and there have been a total of 16 deaths at the Port Talbot plant since 1987—an excessive total by any standard.

The health and safety executive launched a joint investigation with South Wales police into the accident. Corus and the steel workers union, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, are to conduct their own investigations.

In terms of economic damage, Corus does not seem too worried. Shares initially plunged after the blast, but had nearly recovered by Friday night. Analysts said they felt the fire would not have too much impact on Corus' finances. The site produces about 15 percent of the company's annual 20 million tonnes steel output, but Corus is believed to have enough stocks of slab steel left over in its British plants to cope with an initial drop in production. Any exceptional costs incurred by the explosion are likely to be covered by the company's insurance policies.

Corus is the largest steel manufacturer in Europe. The group was formed in 1999 from the merger of British

Steel and Hoogovens of the Netherlands. Since its formation the firm has been in trouble, announcing over 10,000 job losses with around 4,000 still to be implemented from a workforce of 55,000 as at June 30, 2001. Only in September this year it announced the axing of a further 1,500 jobs mostly at its operations in the Netherlands due to an operating loss of £200 million for the first six month's of 2001.



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