

Young worker and father of two killed at Detroit area steel mill

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On Sunday, December 15, at 2:30 a.m., an explosion at the US Steel Corp. (USS) plant located in Ecorse, Michigan, killed Antonino “Nino” Palazzolo, 31, a remote control crane operator. Nino, who worked at the Downriver Detroit mill for two years, leaves behind his wife Josie and two children, Stella, age 3, and Cristofaro, age 10 months.

According to local news reports, a malfunction with the basic oxygen furnace caused a ladle to spill 190 tons of molten iron. The 2,500-degree liquid metal burned through a wall and poured out into the snow where flash freezing caused several explosions, sending shrapnel flying all directions. Palazzolo was working in a shack a few hundred feet away, which was struck by the barrage. Two other workers received minor injuries.

The United Steelworkers (USWA), USS and Ecorse Fire say they are conducting an investigation into the incident.

Many workers complained about unsafe conditions in comments to web sites reporting the fatal incident. One worker at the Ecorse plant said in regards to Palazzolo’s placement at the time of the explosion, “The company took the engineer [remote control crane operator] out of the cab and put him on the ground with a remote control box to save money. If he had been in the cab of the engine where he belonged, he might be alive.”

A former steelworker told this reporter that putting the remote control crane operator on the floor allowed him to do other jobs, cutting labor costs for the company. “A pipefitter is not just a pipefitter. He has to be an electrician, a remote control crane operator and whatever else the company wants. When they put our crane operator on the floor, we had to load and unload the cranes ourselves. With doing so many things at one time, it’s dangerous.”

Since 2008, there have been a number of fatal explosions that the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), USS and the USWA are unwilling to explain. On January 5, 2008, at USS’s nearby Zug Island mill, a 27-year-old contract pipefitter named Thomas Pichler, Jr. was fatally crushed when a gas explosion caused a pipe to dislodge. His parents sued USS, claiming the company allowed flammable gas to enter an inactive pipe, a practice that OSHA later deemed extremely dangerous.

During the trial, it was proven that gas was flowing into the pipe on which Pichler was working and that the lock controlling the flow of gas had been removed before the explosion. Despite the revelation, USS was never indicted and has yet to reveal the source of the explosion.

Nicholas Revetta, 32, was killed on September 3, 2009, at USS’s Clairton, Pennsylvania, mill when gas leaking from a line in the plant’s Chemicals and Energy Division ignited and exploded. Revetta suffered a fatal blow to his head when he was blown backward into a steel column. He left behind a wife and two young children. The cause of the explosion has never been revealed, although USS itself admitted there was a gas leak where Revetta was working and oxygen got in.

Since the initial reports of Palazzolo’s death, there has been complete silence on the incident. Jim Allen, USWA Local 1299 president, told this reporter the findings of MIOSHA, the union and the company were “preliminary.” He refused to give the exact details of the circumstances surrounding Palazzolo’s death. When asked if there had been any other deaths in 2013, he said, “No, not like this.” This reporter also contacted the Ecorse police and fire departments, the US Steel fire operations and USS, all which refused to comment.

The deaths of contract workers—whose numbers have

steadily risen—are not counted in USWA fatality statistics.

The USWA is directly responsible for the long erosion of safety and working conditions in the mills. Since the 1980s, the USWA has worked actively with multinational steel conglomerates and Wall Street financiers to restructure the industry, collaborating in the wave of bankruptcies and mergers that eliminated hundreds of thousands of jobs while increasing workloads for those who remained.

When workers sought to resist, the USWA systematically isolated and betrayed their struggles, including strikes at USS (1987) and Wheeling-Pittsburgh (1997), and most recently the lockouts of Canadian workers at USS's Hamilton, Ontario, works in 2011 and 2013.

So effective has the USWA been in serving corporate interests that the Obama administration selected Ron Bloom, a top advisor to USWA international president Leo Gerard and a former Wall Street investment banker, as the administration's "manufacturing czar" to oversee wage-cutting and speedup throughout US industry.

The USWA national web site reported nothing on Palazzolo. On Local 1299's web site, a perfunctory article was posted on the young worker's death, and local officials donated a mere \$5,000 to the family. In contrast, workers at the mill raised \$27,000 in plant gate collections for his survivors.

Just outside of Detroit, Ecorse is a company town. The city officials and the USWA answer directly to USS, the largest employer in the downriver area. USS and the previous owners of the Ecorse mill—National Steel and Nippon Kokan—repeatedly blackmailed the city by threatening to move on unless officials granted the companies major tax abatements.

Since the 1980s, the city has been in and out of receivership. In 2009, then-Democratic governor Jennifer Granholm appointed an emergency financial manager who stayed in place until March 2013. As part of the Deficit Elimination Plan, eight full-time firefighters were reduced to part-time and the four newly retired firefighters were replaced with part-time reserves. The nearly 1,000 students in the district have only three public schools to attend. The library during the winter months is only open on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

In her online comments on Palazzolo, Thomas Pichler's mother, Wanda, conveyed her deep condolences to the young worker's family. She also warned that his death would be covered up just as her son's was.



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