

Steelworkers union covers for death of contract worker at New York aluminum plant

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Steven Cooper, a contract worker at the Novelis Aluminum plant in Upstate New York, was killed June 30 while working at the plant's remelt and recycling area. The plant is located near Oswego, New York, on Lake Ontario, some 40 miles north of Syracuse.

Jim Ridgeway, an official of the United Steelworkers of America (USW), far from seeking to expose the unsafe working conditions at the plant, maintained the blackout on information and defended the company in relation to Cooper's death. The USW is seeking certification as the bargaining representative for about 600 workers at the plant.

Ridgeway told *Syracuse.com*, "an aluminum plant is a dangerous place to work in general. Unfortunately in this business, these extreme type accidents do happen."

Ridgeway went on to say Cooper's death was a fluke and that "Unions, plants, people always learn from accidents." He added, "OSHA will do a thorough and unbiased investigation. I would certainly imagine that the plant would follow each and every one of their recommendations."

The company, local police and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) are all refusing to provide details on how Steven was killed, saying only that they are conducting an investigation.

In February, workers at the plant voted 287-273 against joining the union. The USW filed unfair labor practices charges with the National Labor Relations Board, (NLRB) and in May the NLRB ruled in the USW's favor. Earlier this month the USW filed for a court injunction to order the company to stop interfering with union organizing efforts. A group of workers, representing over 200 employees, have signed petitions and filed a lawsuit opposing the NLRB attempt to impose the union at Novelis Oswego.

Cooper worked for Matrix Facility Management agency, a commercial cleaning outfit in Syracuse, and was one of a growing number of contract workers employed at the plant.

Like other companies nationwide, Novelis hires workers through contract firms such as Matrix in order to pay them lower wages, provide worse benefits, and allow workers to be fired at will. The promise of becoming a permanent employee is used to entice the contract workers to do whatever they are told and not to speak out on safety or other issues. The use of contract labor further shields the company if a worker is injured or killed on the job.

Earlier this year the WSWs reported on conditions facing 100 temporary workers at the Elbridge, NY, Tessy plastics plant. Temporary workers have a starting pay of \$8.25 an hour with grueling 12-hour work shifts, and workers who spoke out were fired.

Area job listings reveal that this level of pay is not far from the norm. Many companies do not publicize their wages for temporary workers. Those who do set starting wages at \$10 for a machine operator, and \$11 to \$14 for technicians, with no mention of benefits.

The Oswego plant has a record of unsafe working conditions. In 2011, Edward Carvey, 46, was crushed in a piece of equipment he was repairing. Like in Cooper's case, the company, local police and OSHA all refused to release information on the accident, citing the ongoing investigation.

It was nearly a year before OSHA released its report, citing the company for safety violations, including not providing proper safety training and not turning off the power to the machine while repairs were being made, a simple procedure that would have saved Carvey's life. In all, the company was fined only \$44,000, which was reduced to \$33,000 on appeal.

The union's role at Novelis, as is the case throughout the US and the world, is to support the company's drive to cut wages and benefits while expanding the use of contract labor in order to boost the profits of the company and payouts for wealthy investors.

Ridgeway's comments underscore the role of the union as a second layer of management. They have no intentions of fighting to improve the working conditions of workers at the plant, including the most basic right to work in a safe environment. Rather the union seeks to benefit from the dues it will receive as well as from the possible management of pensions and health funds.

The USW in general and Ridgeway in particular are well compensated for this role. Ridgeway himself benefits personally from this arrangement. In 2012, he was paid over \$90,000 by the USW plus another \$20,000 in business expenses, several times the pay of Cooper and the other workers at the plant.



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