Explosion kills worker at US Steel mill in Alabama

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A 53-year-old steelworker was killed and two others critically injured in an explosion Sunday at US Steel's mill in Fairfield, Alabama. The fatal accident was the latest in a series of such incidents at US Steel and other steelmaking corporations, which are undergoing cost-cutting and downsizing.

The Jefferson County Coroner's Office identified the victim as Edward Lamar Bryant from Verbena, Alabama. The two injured workers were Leo Bridges and Mac Bedwell, who remain in critical condition in the trauma and burn unit at the University of Alabama-Birmingham Hospital.

In a statement issued Sunday from company headquarters in Pittsburgh, US Steel officials said, "Late today there was an incident at US Steel's Fairfield Works in Birmingham which resulted in the injury of three employees. Following the incident the employees were transported to an area hospital. An investigation into the incident is underway. No additional details regarding the employees or the status of operations are available at this time."

According to *Birmingham Real-Time News* (al.com), the injuries occurred after a pipe exploded in the Q-BOP (basic oxygen process furnace) where molten steel is made. Bryant arrived at UAB Hospital's emergency room at 4:48 p.m. Sunday, the web site reported, and was pronounced dead from burn complications at 6:08 p.m. The two injured men were admitted to the trauma and burn unit shortly afterwards.

Located 10 miles west of Birmingham in a company town set up by US Steel, the century-old Fairfield Works and Tubular Operations has the capacity to produce 2.4 million tons of steel each year. Its finished sheet products supply the automotive and appliance industries, while its seamless steel pipes, known as oil-country tubular goods (OCTG), are used in oil drilling and natural gas fracking operations in the US and around the world.

Once employing 45,000 workers in World War II, the facility has been reduced to 1,700 workers. According to one industry web site, while automation and state-of-the art manufacturing methods have enabled the factory to operate at high capacity with a "lean" production crew, maintenance at the plant has suffered over the last decade, with a loss of 25 percent of the department's workforce in the mid-2000s alone.

Calls by the *World Socialist Web Site* to the United Steelworkers of America Local 1013, which jointly oversees safety conditions with management at the Fairfield Works, were not answered.

The deadly accident at the Fairfield Works is only the latest at a US Steel facility. On April 4, Chris Castro, a 36-year-old contractor and father of three, was killed at the US Steel Great Lakes Works facility in Ecorse, Michigan when the crane he was operating tipped over. In December 2013, Antonino Palazzolo, a 31-year-old father of two, was killed by an explosion at the same Michigan facility.

Other recent fatal accidents include the crushing of pipefitter Thomas Pichler Jr. in 2008 at a US Steel mill on Zug Island in Detroit, Michigan, and the death of Nicholas Revetta at US Steel's Clairton, Pennsylvania, mill in a 2009 gas explosion.

These deaths cannot be separated from the decades-long decimation of jobs and working conditions, which the steel industry has imposed with the aid of the United Steelworkers union.

These conditions will only get worse with the measures being introduced by former Alcoa executive Mario Longhi who was installed as CEO of the giant steel corporation last year with "a mandate to drastically slash costs and increase efficiency," according to the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*. As part of the cost-cutting campaign—dubbed the "Carnegie Way" after the ruthless 19th century steel baron—Longhi is expected to close one or two steel mills and slash "legacy," i.e., pension and other labor costs.

As part of this, the Fairfield Works—or at least its less profitable sheet division—is being considered for closure, according to analysts who complain of a "glut" in steelmaking capacity. Surrounded by lower cost mills that make similar products, John Tumazos, an industry analyst, told the *Gazette*, "It's a miracle in a sense that Fairfield has continued to make sheet steel this long." The shuttering of massive blast furnaces, he added, would have "the biggest benefit on the cost structure."

Far from opposing job cutting and the undermining of safety conditions, the United Steelworkers has fully collaborated with the steel corporations in the name of the fight against "foreign competition." Earlier this summer, the USWA co-sponsored a pro-company and protectionist "Save Our Steel Jobs" rally with US Steel at the Fairfield plant to denounce supposed dumping by South Korean steelmakers.

The rally, which included various big business politicians posturing as friends of workers, was aimed at enlisting workers into the campaign for greater speedup and job cuts.

The brutal cost-cutting in the steel industry has been exacerbated by the competition among steel producers to meet what was projected to be a significant increase in demand by the energy sector. Another 3 million tons of steelmaking capacity is being added in the US targeting this industry. However, demand has not been as great as anticipated because the energy producers have been able to extract more oil and gas while reducing the number of rigs they operate. The fallout from this failed bet by the corporations and big investors is being paid for by workers with their jobs, their working conditions and their lives.

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 US Steel (1987), Wheeling-Pittsburgh (1997), and most recently, the lockouts of Canadian workers at the US Steel 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 adviser 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.