

# Two killed, five injured in Welsh steel mill explosion

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Two workers were killed and five others injured after an explosion at the Splott steel plant in Cardiff, owned by Celsa Steel UK, on November 18.

The workers who died are named Peter O'Brien, 51, a married father of six children from Cardiff and Mark Sim, 41, married with two children and originally from Newcastle but relocated to Gwent. Both were sports enthusiasts. O'Brien represented his local team, St Peters Rugby Football Club. Sim coached the under 14s youth side at Caldicot Town FC.

The explosion took place in an oil accumulator situated at the rod and bar mill on East Moore Road. Witnesses heard the blast more than half a mile away, describing it as a deafening bang, which shook buildings and windows. Others felt the blast rumble through the floor and said that black smoke was blowing across the area. One resident told the BBC, "It sounded like a car bomb to be honest with you."

Several ambulances and eight fire appliances from the South Wales Fire and Rescue attended the scene. A major incident protocol was put in place by firefighters and health chiefs. Four workers were taken to the University Hospital of Wales.

A press statement released by Alice Casey, chief operating officer for Cardiff and Vale University Health Board said that they were treating the explosion as a major incident. Casey advised the public to think carefully if they needed to attend the unit to make use of other health services. "There may be delays for non-urgent patients attending the Emergency Unit at University Hospital of Wales".

Celsa Steel UK is a part of the Spanish-owned Celsa Group and is one of the UK's three major steel makers. It manufactures several steel products for the construction, automotive, shipbuilding, mining and agriculture industries. Celsa UK is classed as a major

employer in Wales, with approximately 1,000 workers—725 at its Cardiff site. The BBC reported that it contributes more than £105 million to the Welsh economy and supports 3,000 more jobs indirectly. It has plants in Spain, Poland and the UK.

The Cardiff plant was originally owned and run by GKN, but closed in 1978. It was reopened when Allied Steel and Wire (ASW) took it over in the 1980s. ASW went into receivership in 2002. Retired ASW workers are still fighting to get the pension they were promised after the company collapsed. In February this year, the then-Conservative Work and Pensions Minister Mark Harper said there was a limit to the amount of support taxpayers could provide.

Under the heading, "Corporate Responsibility—Health and Safety", the company's website states, "Celsa UK is committed to ensuring the highest standard of health and safety and welfare for its employees."

A statement read out shortly after the explosion by an official said, "Safety is our paramount concern at all of our facilities and the wellbeing of our colleagues is our number one priority. Our thoughts and deepest sympathies are with those affected and their families, who have been informed."

The day after the explosion, Luis Sanz, the head of Celsa Steel, spoke on camera outside the plant. He said Celsa "are incredibly grateful to the local community for their support and solidarity at such a difficult time... In memory of our colleagues, we will strive to avoid another day like yesterday."

The same failure to identify the causes of the explosion was taken by the trade union at the plant, Community. General Secretary Roy Rickhuss, said, "Lessons will need to be learnt from what happened so that this cannot happen again but for today we should be focused on supporting everybody affected."

The *Financial Times* cited the union as saying “it understood that steel production was continuing at the Rover Way plant, about a mile from the scene of the accident.”

The Cardiff factory is run 24 hours a day, seven days a week on 12 hour shifts, which is customary in UK steel manufacturing. It reduces labour costs and ensures continuity of production. In July last year, three workers were taken to hospital suffering from burns. Before Wednesday’s fatalities this was the latest in a list of health and safety issues at the Cardiff plant.

In May 2011, Celsa were fined £50,000 after it was charged with negligence by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Neil Smith had a hand crushed in a rolling mill used for processing red hot steel. The incident happened in 2009, when Smith was using callipers to measure steel as it moved along a track. The court was told that the steel reaches temperatures of between 800 and 900 degrees celsius as it goes through the rollers and travels at a speed of one metre a second.

Smith’s glove became caught in the calliper, which dragged his hand into the rolling mill. Two middle fingers were partially amputated and extensive reconstruction work was made to his little finger.

At the court hearing, a representative of the HSE described using callipers to measure moving steel as an “extremely dangerous operation”. Celsa admitted to having used the calliper method for several years prior to the accident. They were fined £50,000.

During the hearing it was reported that Celsa at Cardiff had been found guilty of other major health and safety breaches.

Worker Mathew Walters lost four toes when his foot was trapped in machinery in 2006. The HSE told a hearing the company should have taken measures to ensure that the machinery parts were suitably guarded. Celsa was fined £3,000.

In May 2007, John Penhalagan, who had worked for Celsa for three years, was killed when a 3.7 ton crane hook used to move ladles of molten steel hit him on the head, crushing his skull. The HSE gave evidence that the crane operators were unable to see the workers moving about beneath the operating cab. Celsa was fined £200,000.

Another worker, an electrician doing routine cleaning and maintenance at the Melt Shop, was described as having catastrophic injuries caused by an electric

shock. Henry Truszkowski, aged 51, suffered serious burns as a result of the accident in July 2008. The 33,000 volt charge he received was a result of the company’s failing to properly safeguard high voltage electrical conductors under Section 2(1) of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.

Truszkowski was described as fighting for his life for several weeks after the incident and the injuries he sustained caused him never to work again. Celsa was convicted of failing to ensure its employees’ safety and fined £96,000.

In both Mr. Smith and Mr. Walters’ cases, the causes of the accidents were seen as common practice and allowed to go on unchecked. They only became a problem, a health and safety issue, when both workers suffered major injuries. The company was fined a minor sum.



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