

Worker killed at US Steel mill in Indiana

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Last Friday, Jonathan Arrizola, a 30-year-old steelworker, was killed while working at the US Steel slab storage yard in Gary, Indiana. The cause of death is yet to be officially determined by the Lake County coroner. However, layoffs and forced overtime imposed by management with the complicity of the United Steelworkers (USW) union have increased the dangers confronting workers at the mill and throughout the steel industry.

Arrizola was a member of USW Local 1066 and worked in a four-member crew of maintenance welders who performed routine work on cranes in the Gary hot strip mill. He was a veteran of the US Navy and left behind a wife and two young children.

In a message to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Arrizola's widow, Whitney, said her husband and other workers had major concerns about safety at the plant. "This shouldn't have to happen to anyone," she told the WSW. "Please help keep this from happening to others. I cannot even begin to explain the hole in my heart."

Whitney told local media her husband was working 70-90 hours per week and conditions were getting so dangerous that he was actively looking for another job before his death.

In a statement, US Steel management said, "An investigation is underway, and we will work closely with the United Steelworkers and relevant government agencies throughout the process."

Any such investigation by US Steel, the USW and the government safety agencies will only result in a cover-up. The USW functions as a tool of management and has done everything US Steel has demanded for speed up, forced overtime and job cuts in the name of making the company more "competitive."

In a Facebook post, USW Local 1014 President Rodney D. Lewis suggested that Arrizola's death was caused by the failure of workers to look after each

other. "WE HAVE TO WATCH EACH OTHERS' BACKS!! Make a promise to yourself that not only will you refuse to work unsafely, you will take a stand with the Brother/Sister next to you to keep THEM safe as well. We really are all we've got!"

The USW has aided and abetted management's cost-cutting drive. In August, 275 maintenance workers at the Gary Works mill were laid off. Crews with fewer workers, and contract laborers instead of full-time employees, are unable to perform routine maintenance required to keep the mill in safe working condition. Heavy machinery, such as cranes, can topple over if routine maintenance is not performed properly.

One worker from Gary Works, who wished to remain anonymous, told the WSW that maintenance crews were so short-staffed that preventive maintenance was not being performed, and that repairing complete breakdowns—that slowed down output—was the only work that the crews were currently engaged in.

Maintenance workers are also given minimal training before being required to work on some of the most dangerous jobs, which require heavy lifting and exposure to high temperatures. Many are working on jobs before they have had the chance to complete training programs because the company shut them down. The union has done nothing to stop this.

The Gary Works worker told the WSW that management at the mill forced workers to work double shifts on irregular schedules that changed with only three days' notice. Workers at the mill were afraid to face retaliation if they complained about the dangerous conditions. The union did nothing to protect workers when they complained. "Everytime they change our rotation or move guys around the union claims that management can do it. That is pretty much the response we get, 'Oh, they can do that.'"

He went on to voice the frustrations with the most recent national labor agreement the USW pushed

through on February 1 of this year. “After this last contract the general consensus is that the union acted like second-string management.”

USW International President Leo Gerard sits on President Obama’s corporate productivity board, and held a White House meeting with the president, along with other AFL-CIO and Change to Win union bureaucrats, on the eve of the contract expiration for 30,000 steelworkers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal (AM) in August 2015. The USW then blocked any strike by steelworkers while isolating the six-month lockout of 2,200 workers at Allegheny Technologies, Inc. The USW then pushed through concession-laden contracts at AM and USS earlier this year.

As it has for decades, the USW has sought to justify its collaboration with the steel bosses by blaming the attacks on workers, not on the global crisis of capitalism, but on the supposed “stealing of US jobs” by foreign steelmakers and workers. The latest round of job cuts—which are affecting workers in every country, including China—the USW claims is due to “illegally low-priced imports from China and elsewhere.”

Arrizola died just one and a half months after US Steel decided to replace maintenance workers at its Gary mill with contract workers, following consultation with the Chicago-based firm McKinsey & Co., in order to cut costs. US Steel CEO Mario Longhi lost 35 percent of his annual \$13.2 million salary in 2015 due to falling share prices of the company’s stock, and the corporation is determined to sweat out more production and profits from workers.

The tragic death of Jonathan Arrizola comes amid a number of other fatalities in the steel and rubber industry, which is also “represented” by the USW. Last September, a contract worker died on the job at the US Steel Edgar Thomson Plant in Braddock, Pennsylvania. Four workers died over the course of a year from August 2015 to 2016 at the Goodyear plant in Danville, Virginia. OSHA investigations at the Danville plant resulted in a mere \$17,000 fine for the death of one worker, Jeanie Stradler, and joint investigations by the company and the USW resulted in no improvement of working conditions for steelworkers.

The only way the truth will come out is if rank-and-file workers organize an independent investigation into Arrizola’s death.



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