

Contract worker killed at Indiana steel mill

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A contract truck driver was killed at the ArcelorMittal plant in Burns Harbor, Indiana on Friday, November 4. Kevin Campbell, 69, was struck by another contract semi truck driver while he was securing a load of steel to his own truck.

Burns Harbor police have begun their investigation of the accident, which, according to Police Chief Mike Heckman, is expected to take six to eight weeks. Police have ruled out the possibility of drugs or alcohol as causes of the accident, and said they expected no arrests to be made, calling the tragedy a “freak accident.”

The Indiana Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) will not investigate the incident, because the agency does not cover independent contract workers like Mr. Campbell. The Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) will also not investigate the accident because it occurred on private property. The United Steelworkers union (USW) said it wants to be involved in the investigation, supposedly to assess whether new safety measures should be implemented, according to Pete Trinidad, USW Local 6787 president.

Despite its declarations of concern, the USW’s role in the investigation will bear no benefit to workers. After decades of colluding with the steel bosses in cutting costs, imposing speed-up and longer hours, blocking any resistance by workers, the USW’s role will be to protect ArcelorMittal by foisting the blame on workers themselves.

There were many workers present at the scene of Campbell’s death, which was reportedly very gruesome, though the exact details are not yet known. The USW plans to provide counseling to workers who were present when the accident occurred. Trinidad told local news that “steel mills are a dangerous place to work.”

Through the proliferation of various labor-management safety committees—which largely absolve

federal, state and local agencies of oversight—the USW has protected corporations from any responsibility for wrongdoing in the deaths of workers. These cover-up operations come at the expense of workers, who, despite union investigations, continue to die on the job.

Four workers died over the course of a year from August 2015 to 2016 at the Goodyear plant in Danville, Virginia. Goodyear workers are members of the USW. Another worker, steelworker Jonathan Arrizola, was killed in September while working on a maintenance job at the US Steel mill in Gary, Indiana, near Burns Harbor. A union official suggested his death was due to the failure of workers “to look after each other” while working overtime and undermanned. The responsibility for Arrizola’s death, as in Campbell’s, lay in the hands of the corporation and the USW, which aided in cutting back staff and pay and facilitating the replacement of full-time employees with contract laborers.

After Arrizola’s death, the USW promised to investigate the cause, projecting that the so-called investigation could take months. After nearly two months, no conclusions have been released to the public.

Any new safety measures implemented by the union following an investigation would largely not be for the benefit of independent contract workers like Kevin Campbell and the truck driver who struck him. Though they may work for a specific contracting company, these workers are not considered “employees” of any company, but self-employed “independent contractors,” leaving them legally deprived of many protections and benefits of full-time employees. These include proper job and safety training, health care and retirement benefits, unemployment benefits, minimum wage guarantees, and overtime pay.

The USW forced 14,000 ArcelorMittal workers to labor without a new contract for 10 months in order to isolate them from 18,000 US Steel workers whose

contracts also expired in August 2015, and another 2,200 steelworkers locked out by Pittsburgh-based Allegheny Technologies. It then rammed through a sellout deal at ArcelorMittal in June 2016, which has given the steel giant a free pass to hire independent contractors in the name of improving “competitiveness” and profits. The terms of the contract allow the company to hire one non-union worker for every four union workers hired. This means that a large portion of the future workforce will be made up of casualized workers, like Kevin Campbell, with few if any rights.

The contract also freezes wages for three years, amounting to a cut in real wages, and in place of a raise gives employees the option to take part in profit sharing program that is largely pegged to the price of steel. Having pushed through the deal, USW President Leo Gerard said he would join the steelmakers in demanding tariffs on steel from China, South Korea and other countries. The USW has long used such nationalist campaigns to divide US workers from their class brothers and sisters around the world and to cover up the union’s collaboration in the endless attacks on the jobs and living standards of US workers.

Campbell is far from the first contract worker to die at Burns Harbor. In April 2015, 53-year-old Gregory Sebahar, a contract worker for KONE Elevators & Escalators, was found dead after he was crushed working on an elevator at the mill. In another incident at US Steel in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, contract worker Parrish Sewell, 44, died after he fell over 40 feet while performing maintenance operations.

Following Campbell’s death in Indiana, a utility worker was killed in Canton, Illinois on Wednesday. Arturo Silva, Jr. was killed by an explosion while working on a gas line that was reportedly damaged by a contract worker earlier. The cause of the blast remains to be found.

Workers must break free from the suffocating grasp of the pro-company unions and form rank-and-file committees to investigate the deaths of Kevin Campbell, Jonathan Arrizola, Arturo Silva, Jr. and others, and to guarantee safe working conditions. These committees must reject the corporatist program of labor-management “partnership,” which subordinates the lives and limbs of workers for corporate profit.



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