

32-year-old worker dies at Detroit area US Steel mill

Our reporter
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A 32-year-old worker from Cleveland, Ohio fell to his death at US Steel's Great Lakes Steel Facility in the Detroit suburb of Ecorse, Michigan early Monday morning. The death of the still unidentified worker, a contractor for Mid-American Group, is the latest in a series of fatalities at the steel company, which has implemented deep cost-cutting measures that have undermined basic safety.

Very little has been disclosed about the accident, other than that the victim fell 20 feet to his death. The local media reported that the Ecorse police and fire services were not called for assistance because the company has its own emergency response service.

According to the *Southgate News Herald*, "Ecorse police have confirmed that a man working at U.S. Steel was killed at about 3:30 a.m. Monday in an accident inside the main plant." The newspaper continued, "A representative from U.S. Steel only would confirm that there was 'an incident' at the plant and referred all questions to Mid-American Group, an industrial construction contracting firm that provides various services to companies."

Fox 2 News reported that initially both Mid-American, based out of Newport, Michigan, and the Ecorse police refused to comment on the accident. Only later did the police confirm that a worker was fatally injured at the plant.

The State of Michigan's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) also released as little information as possible, stating only, "MIOSHA has responded to this incident but cannot provide information on an open investigation. Typically, this type of investigation may take several weeks or months to complete," Matthew Erickson of MIOSHA said.

The WSWs left messages with United Steelworkers (USW) Local 1299 seeking information about the

fatality but the union did not return the calls. An estimated 1,400 hourly workers at the steel mill are members of the USW local.

Workers at the mill have long charged that US Steel has failed to meet standard health and safety regulations. Workers face grueling work schedules, including seven-day workweeks, and the mill is dangerously understaffed. Overworked electrical and mechanical maintenance crews are herded into labor gangs and sent throughout the mill where they are too hurried to take precautionary steps that were once standard.

Rather than hiring more full-time workers, the company has expanded the use of lower paid contractors who do not get US Steel-paid medical or retirement benefits. Under the so-called "Carnegie Way" plan, the company has eliminated a quarter of its salaried employees and slashed thousands of jobs in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois and Alabama.

Far from opposing these attacks, the USW has collaborated with the corporation's cost-cutting plans in the name of boosting US Steel's competitiveness and profitability. In 2015, the union blocked a strike by US Steel, ArcelorMittal and Allegheny Technologies workers and agreed to another sellout contract that further rolls back the living standards and conditions of workers.

As for regulatory agencies like MIOSHA, they have generally outsourced the issue of safety to joint labor-management safety committees, run by US Steel and its corporate "partners" in the USW. MIOSHA only has 70 inspectors and in fiscal year 2016 it conducted 4,662 inspections, covering about two percent of the workplaces in Michigan.

There have been at least three other deaths at the Ecorse mill since 2013. On December 15, 2013, an

explosion at the mill killed Antonino “Nino” Palazzolo, a 31-year-old remote control crane operator and a father of two small children. On April 4, 2014, Chris Castro, a 36-year-old contractor with Connelly Crane and father of three, was killed when the crane he was operating tipped over near the plant’s number two oxygen furnace.

On April 18, 2015, 41-year-old steelworker Heather D. Warren was killed as a semi-truck backing up with steel coils crushed her to death as she was acting as a spotter for another truck on the loading dock. Rather than holding US Steel accountable, the Wayne County prosecutor charged the driver, a contract worker, with manslaughter, a crime punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

In addition to injuries there have been a spate of deaths at US Steel mills around the country. In March 2017, Timothy Dagon, 42-year-old steelworker, was killed in an accident at a rail yard at the US Steel mill in Granite City, Illinois, near St. Louis.

This followed the deaths of two workers at the Gary Works, in northwestern Indiana, last year. On June 15, 2016, Charles Kremke, 67, died in the hospital after what was initially called a heart attack. It turned out that he had been electrocuted.

On September 30, 2016, 30-year-old steelworker Jonathan Arrizola, an electrician and father of two, died after he was electrocuted while trying to fix a crane in the slab yard at Gary Works. The week before his death, Arrizola suffered an electric shock and told his wife, Whitney, that conditions in steel mill were getting very dangerous due to cutbacks. She told the local media her husband was working 70-90 hours per week and conditions were so dangerous that he was actively looking for another job before his death.

In a message to the WSWS, Whitney Arrizola 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 WSWS. “Please help keep this from happening to others. I cannot even begin to explain the hole in my heart.”

In other comments to the local media, she added, “All they care about is making money. They don’t care that it affects other people. He has a 4-year-old who’s turning 5. They keep cutting when they should have a safer environment for people. It shouldn’t be all about the money.

“I have no husband now, my children have no father,” she said. “I have no idea how I’m going to pay for my house or my car, any of our bills, I was a stay-at-home mother. I have no experiences, Jon was everything to me.”

A GoFundMe page was set up to raise funds for the family.

The Indiana Department of Labor found US Steel committed two serious safety violations at Gary Works after investigating the death of Arrizola, including failing to provide safety training and protections against live electrical equipment. According to state inspectors, maintenance employees were performing repairs to the 501 crane in the slab yard while three collector rails were live, exposing them to deadly electrical hazards.

The agency fined the steelmaker a mere \$14,000.



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