

Worker exposes deadly conditions at Detroit area US Steel mill

Shannon Jones
12 September 2017

A Facebook post shared more than 15,000 times as of this writing details the harrowing experience of five workers at the United States Steel Great Lakes workers in Ecorse, Michigan, just outside of Detroit, who were exposed to deadly methyl mercaptan gas earlier this year. The incident reveals the callous indifference of management to health and safety and the role of the United Steelworkers union, which functions as an enforcer for the steel companies.

According to a post by Nicholas Doyle, a crane operator at the Great Lakes Works, he and four other men ended up in the hospital after being exposed to methyl mercaptan gas that is well known to be hazardous to humans and can be fatal in high doses.

Doyle describes how in April 2017 he and four other crane operators became sick after being exposed to the gas while working the night shift at the facility. The men reported the smell of gas to management, but were told to keep working. Eventually the men became so sick they could no longer work and parked their cranes. At that point Doyle and another man were taken to the hospital, soon followed by the three other operators.

At the hospital the men were treated and assigned to 72-hour bed rest. They were told not to operate heavy machinery or to report back to work until their symptoms cleared.

On leaving the hospital, Doyle writes, “Myself and the man I was brought there with were picked up by [US Steel] security and brought back to the mill.” There they were asked to give a statement to the company safety coordinator. They were then forced to wait 12 hours for a company doctor to evaluate them. Finally the men demanded that they be permitted to leave. However, the head of security insisted on making them stay. Only after they threatened to call the police were the men allowed to leave.

However, on arriving back at the mill Doyle reported they got a call from “James Allen who is the Union President of [USW] local 1299 telling him that we needed to stay and wait for the company doctor.” They then waited another seven hours for the company doctor, who, after he examined them, told them to report back to work.

The men did not to work the next day. Doyle reports, “We all called off. The next day, and thank God we did, Dave, the guy I went to the hospital with was found by his wife on his kitchen floor unresponsive. He’s still in and out of the hospital. Three days after that, Glenn was hospitalized for almost two weeks.”

Doyle reported that as a result of the incident he and his co-workers faced disciplinary action from the company, with their requests for help being ignored by the union, which warned them against hiring an attorney.

He concludes, “US Steel poisoned us, and is trying to punish us for getting sick because of it. The Union turned its back and we have nowhere to go. We need help. I have paperwork. We all do. Spread this message.”

This is not the first case of workers being poisoned by exposure to toxic levels of methyl mercaptan gas. Four workers at a DuPont Chemical plant in La Porte, Texas died in 2014 after a leak of the deadly substance. As a result the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) placed the company in its “severe violator” program.

This is not the only serious safety incident reported at the Great Lakes Works this year. In May a 32-year-old contract worker from Cleveland died at the mill after suffering a fall. According to a report by Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) on the tragedy, “A 47-year-old iron worker

was welding shims on a vessel and fell 25 feet striking scaffolding below lacerating their neck and chest.”

Workers at the facility had been working mandatory 12-hour shifts amid reports of dangerous understaffing. Rather than hiring more full-time workers, the company has expanded its use of lower paid contractors who do not get full pay or benefits.

These conditions have been abetted by the USW, which has collaborated with the company’s cost cutting drive in the name of ensuring US Steel’s global competitiveness. When the contract for US Steel workers expired in 2015, the USW blocked a strike and accepted a contract that further rolled back living standards and working conditions.

For its part MIOSHA has outsourced much of its role to joint union-management safety committees that act as a front for management. In fiscal 2016 MIOSHA carried out inspections of only about 2 percent of Michigan workplaces.

In response to the Facebook post by Doyle, thousands of other workers posted comments in support. The wife of a steelworker wrote, “My husband does work on [Z]ug island [a US Steel mill near the Ecorse facility] every year. They are known to be very particular about keeping everyone in a line like good little soldiers. They act as if they are above their civilian counterparts. Money brings out the evil in everything and everyone. Everyone who passes onto the island knows they are at the mercy of these crackpots. It’s disturbing. I’m not the least bit surprised this happened at [US Steel] in Ecorse.”

In August several workers were injured in an explosion at the US Steel facility on Zug Island. The cause of the explosion has not been released.

Another wrote, “Unions no longer care about the employees....they are just for the company!!! But they continue to collect your union dues and do nothing to stand by you!!! Get a good lawyer soon!! Thinking of you guys and hope you all get the help you need for this!!!!”

The collaboration between the USW and US Steel ensures there will be no serious attempt to address safety concerns at the Great Lakes Works. This fact was highlighted by the cover-up of the conditions leading to the tragic death of Jonathan Arrizola in October 2016 at the US Steel Gary Works in northwest Indiana. Arrizola was electrocuted while performing

maintenance on an overhead crane just one and a half months after US Steel laid off all maintenance staff and replaced them with contract workers. Non-maintenance staff were forced to take on the work left behind.

The USW international and USW Local 1066 blocked any resistance by steelworkers who were demanding strike action after Arrizola’s death, which followed the June 2016 electrocution death of 67-year-old electrician Charles Kremke at the same mill.

USW President Leo Gerard, like the United Auto Workers, has given enthusiastic support to the ultra nationalist, protectionist policies of the Trump administration, including plans to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement. Gerard was also a member of the Trump administration’s Manufacturing Jobs Initiative until the council collapsed in the wake of the Nazi riot in Charlottesville, Virginia.

The nationalist program of the USW is not aimed at defending the rights of steelworkers, but of pitting American steelworkers against their brother steelworkers in China and other countries in a drive to ensure the global “competitiveness” of US Steel and other steel giants and to prepare for war.

The defense of the working conditions of US Steel workers cannot be left in the hands of the USW, which has demonstrated repeatedly that it is a tool of management. Workers must organize rank-and-file committees, independent of the USW, to oversee health and safety and fight for a full and independent investigation of this and other incidents.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact