

Fifteen workers hospitalized after explosion at US Steel mill south of Detroit

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An explosion at US Steel's Great Lakes Works Zug Island mill in River Rouge, Michigan, near Detroit on Friday night sent 15 boilermakers to local hospitals. Police and fire crews were called to the scene after the explosion. According to a statement released by US Steel on Saturday, all workers affected were contract employees hired through Songer Services, a heavy industrial general contracting firm. As of Saturday, 12 of the workers had been released and three remained in treatment.

The full extent of the injuries suffered by workers is unknown at this time and press reports indicate an ongoing investigation into the cause of the blast. According to the company's statement, the explosion occurred at the D4 Blast Furnace and involved the dust catcher.

Boilermakers contacted by a local news outlet said the workers had been told by supervisors to clean out the dust separator, which was packed with ash, but they initially resisted, saying it was a safety issue.

As a result of the ensuing explosion ash fell on all 15 boilermakers. One boilermaker crawled on his hands and knees to pull another boilermaker out of the ash. He and two others are still hospitalized with serious injuries, including severe burns.

A blast furnace is the first step in the steel-making process. Its role is to purify iron ore, which consists of iron minerals and impurities, into a molten metal of about 95 per cent iron content. The temperatures inside these massive furnaces can reach over 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

Large amounts of dust can accumulate in plants that are inconsistently and improperly maintained. Dust explosions occur under conditions when the dust is suspended in air, ignites under exposure to high heat and is confined such that damaging pressures can accumulate. The risk of dust explosions is reduced significantly with

the implementation of proper engineering controls, ventilation, training and regular maintenance.

In 2015, then US Steel CEO Mario Longhi worked with Chicago-based industrial consulting firm McKinsey & Co. to develop a plan to cut operating costs across the company in order to increase profits and maintain the wealth of its top executives and shareholders after losing \$1.5 billion in 2014 in the face of declining steel prices and rising competition. McKinsey & Co. advised US Steel to cut costs by implementing mass layoffs and hiring more contract workers.

This resulted in the loss of experienced workers, many of whom worked in maintenance positions, and the hiring of underpaid contract workers who are not granted the same benefits as full-time employees, including safety and job training.

After seven months of negotiations in which workers labored without a contract from 2015 to 2016, the United Steelworkers Union pushed through concessions contracts at US Steel that implemented these cost-cutting measures in addition to freezing wages and cutting health and retirement benefits. After the 2015 contracts were pushed through, 12,000 steelworkers were laid off nationwide.

During the negotiations, the USW isolated workers at US Steel, ArcelorMittal and specialty steelmaker Allegheny Technologies in order to aid the global corporations in restructuring the international steel industry at the expense of the working class.

The terms of the rotten agreements pushed through by the USW have increased the number of injuries and deaths suffered by steelworkers over the past decade. The USW, closely allied with the Obama and now Trump administrations, has made the lowering of wages, cutting of healthcare and retirement benefits and cuts to safety measures a part of its economic strategy to help maintain the "competitiveness" of the steel corporations.

The recent explosion is one of many incidents at Great

Lakes Works in which both contract and regular workers have been killed or injured.

- On January 5, 2008, 27-year-old contract pipefitter Thomas Pichler Jr. was killed after being crushed by a pipe dislodged by a gas explosion. His parents sued the company, claiming that it allowed flammable gas to enter an inactive pipe, a practice which the Occupational Safety and Health Administration deemed to be extremely dangerous.

- On December 15, 2013, 31-year-old remote control crane operator Antonino Palazzolo was killed after being struck by flying shrapnel after a malfunction with a basic oxygen furnace caused 190 tons of molten iron to spill out, hitting the snow and flash freezing to cause multiple explosions.

- On April 4, 2014, 36-year-old contract worker Chris Castro was killed while operating a crane which tipped over near the plant's number two oxygen furnace.

- On April 19, 2015, 41-year-old shipping worker Heather Warren was killed after she was struck by a semitrailer that she was spotting at the plant's Cold Mill Shipping facility. After her death, Warren's sister complained to the media that she had not been trained for the job she was performing when she was killed.

- In April 2017, five crane operators became severely ill after exposure to gas while working the night shift at the plant. A Facebook account, which detailed the experience, was posted by one of the workers, Nicholas Doyle, and was shared over 15,000 times.

- On July 31, 2017, five workers were injured in an explosion whose cause remains unknown at the plant's 80-inch hot strip mill south of Detroit.

There has been virtually no discussion of safety and environmental issues facing steelworkers during the current contract negotiations between the USW and US Steel and ArcelorMittal. The current contracts are set to expire September 1 and cover workers at these corporations across the US.

In an August 3 memo to union members on its website,

the USW stated: "The most substantial discussion we have had with the company so far in 2018 revolved around Repair and Maintenance (R&M) and Capital Expenditures (CAPEX)... While there are differences between how our union and management approach these issues, we recognize that working together to make our plants more efficient and profitable will make all of our jobs more secure."

The USW is involved in joint safety and environmental health committees in which they work with company management to cut costs to safety and maintenance programs in the plant in the name of "increasing efficiency." Thus any concerns that the USW professes to raise for workers health and safety are completely empty.

In addition, there have been no discussions of wages and benefits during the current negotiations while details of the discussions are being kept hidden from the workers.

For workers to win their demands for a safe workplace will require a fight against the steel corporations and the USW, which has worked hand-in-hand with the steel companies to attack workers' living standards. Meanwhile, it has lined up with the steel companies and the Trump administration in launching trade war against the foreign rivals of US capitalism, attempting to pit American steelworkers against their brother steelworkers in Canada, Mexico, Germany and around the world. As in the 1930s, the launching of trade war presages the development of armed conflict between the major powers.

In order to carry out their struggle, steelworkers need to organize independently of the USW to form rank-and-file committees to put forth their demands, oversee negotiations and fight to link their struggles with those of steelworkers internationally. Only if steelworkers are organized on this basis can they win their struggle against the corporations for the right to a safe workplace, decent working hours and good wages and benefits.



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