

Worker injured in explosion at ArcelorMittal steel mill in Indiana

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7 November 2018

A worker was injured in an explosion that occurred around 4:30 p.m. Monday at ArcelorMittal's Indiana Harbor steel mill in East Chicago, Indiana. The explosion ignited a fire that East Chicago firefighters and ArcelorMittal's in-house fire department took two hours to extinguish, according to press reports. The blast was big enough that smoke was seen billowing outside of the giant steel mill.

East Chicago Fire Chief Anthony Serna told the *Northwest Indiana Times* that the worker suffered burns from the blast, which occurred in a basic oxygen furnace. The injured worker has been taken to East Chicago Hospital, and at this time neither his condition or identity have been released, nor his proximity to the explosion.

According to ArcelorMittal's website, the Indiana Harbor mill is the largest integrated steelmaking facility in North America, capable of producing 9.5 million tons of hot-rolled steel annually. The Luxembourg-based corporation, the largest steelmaker in the world, reported \$899 million in net earnings in the third quarter, down slightly from \$1.2 billion the previous year. The profits have been extracted from workers who have faced relentless speedup, years of wage freezes and cost-cutting measures imposed through the collaboration of the United Steelworkers (USW) union.

USW union locals 1010 and 1011, which cover workers at the Indiana Harbor mill, gave no public comments on the industrial accident nor did they release any information about the injury on their Facebook or website pages. The USW international also ignored the injury on its web page.

A veteran worker at ArcelorMittal's Burns Harbor mill, 30 miles from Indiana Harbor, told the *World Socialist Web Site Steelworker Newsletter*, "I haven't seen nor heard anything more about [the injury] than

the [*Times*] article. Nothing on any of the ArcelorMittal or USW sites have given any updates on [their] condition either.

"ArcelorMittal has a history of talking about safety and preaching it when convenient. When I had my safety concerns brought to the company's head of safety at the east office, he told me, and I quote, 'We make steel, we don't make safety.'

"Pretty much since that conversation I do what I feel is safe," he continued. "I don't rely on the company to do anything but the bare minimum."

Management has been encouraged to impose speedup and other cost-cutting measures by the collusion of the USW, which has done everything to block a strike by ArcelorMittal workers, along with workers at US Steel, despite the repeated demand for more givebacks from workers. The USW has forced 15,000 workers at ArcelorMittal USA and 16,000 workers at US Steel to remain on the jobs two months since their contracts expired on September 1 even though the workers voted unanimously to authorize strike action.

A Burns Harbor worker told the *Steelworker Newsletter* about the union's lack of concern for safety issues. "We rarely get grievances settled that don't get to Step 3. Our zone griever doesn't fight for us to any sort of measurable result.

"I have little faith in our union, as a whole. Most I believe are doing it to either A.) Not actually work in a steel mill but still receive the pay and benefits or B.) Enjoy having some sort of 'authority.'

"The Burns Harbor USW has something called the 'Steelworkers Caucus,' which is a group within the union who represent themselves. I believe that this union within the union is 100% wrong and divides us."

Commenting on the upcoming vote on the tentative agreement reached by the USW, the worker added, "I

don't personally hold much hope for the accuracy of the [contract vote] count either to be quite honest. But I do have to say that this contract has had the most outspoken critics that I've seen."

On Friday, ArcelorMittal and the USW announced they reached a tentative contract agreement. Rather than sending out the entire contract and giving time to study and discuss it, the USW is sending out a "highlights" summary and forcing a vote on the deal in coming weeks. Workers at US Steel are currently voting on a similar sellout deal.

Although both corporations realized large third quarter profits, the contract offers include only a 14 percent raise over the course of four years, barely keeping pace with inflation, along with healthcare and pension concessions, particularly for incoming workers.

The USW has spent decades collaborating with management in attacking conditions in the mills. The union gave the green light for mass layoffs between 2015 and 2016, which resulted in longer working hours and speedup for the remaining workforce. This led to a series of injuries and fatalities in mills throughout the country.

The *WSWS Steelworker Newsletter* calls for workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal to elect rank-and-file committees in every mill and facility. These committees should institute rank-and-file oversight of the voting process, including requiring that the ballots be submitted in person and counted in front of representatives elected by the rank and file.

At the same time, the factory committees should establish lines of communication between plants and draw up a list of demands based on what workers need, not what is supposedly affordable for the steel giants. These should include a 40 percent wage increase for all workers, the restoration of the cost of living allowance (COLA) and fully funded healthcare and pension benefits, a reduction of work hours with no loss of pay, and the establishment of industrial democracy through workers' control of production.

There is plenty of money in the coffers of these multi-billion-dollar corporations to meet these demands, but they will not be won outside of a struggle against the private ownership of the steel industry by wealthy CEOs and Wall Street investors. Lakshmi Mittal, CEO of ArcelorMittal, has a net worth of \$15.4 billion, not due to his intelligence or hard work, but because of his

exploitation of thousands of workers worldwide. While refusing to meet workers' demands, US Steel is squandering \$300 million on stock buybacks for the benefit of its richest investors.

Preparations should begin for strike action by workers at US Steel, ArcelorMittal and the rest of the steel industry. Rank-and-file committees must link up with the widest sections of workers—United Parcel Service workers, teachers, autoworkers and Amazon workers—to prepare a general strike. This industrial offensive must be linked up with the development of a powerful political movement of the working class to fight for a socialist alternative to the profit system, which would include the transformation of the steel industry and the banks into publicly owned enterprises.



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