

Former ArcelorMittal steelworker speaks out on safety conditions and union repression

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10 June 2019

The name of the worker interviewed has been changed to protect him from retaliation from ArcelorMittal and the United Steelworkers union.

Milan, a former steelworker at ArcelorMittal's Indiana Harbor plant in East Chicago, Indiana, spoke to the WSW Steelworker Newsletter after reading about the death of Edwin Fleming at the plant where he formerly worked. He expressed concern that neither the company nor the United Steelworkers union (USW) would ever reveal the true causes of Fleming's death.

"Ed was dead for two hours before anyone came to find him," he said. "We were told that he died because he threw the switch in the engine that he was operating, but it fell back, causing him to have an accident. However, this is not possible because those switches are very hard to move. They would not just fall back."

Milan was fired after voicing multiple grievances about safety hazards at the plant. These were the subject of inspections carried out by the Indiana Occupational Safety and Health Administration (IOSHA). There were complaints about lack of reinforcement around windows, making it especially hazardous for workers as explosions occur when manganese blasts through the windows. All but one of the inspected safety hazards resulted in no safety orders recommended. One paltry fine for \$2,150 was issued for failure to protect workers from a 30-foot fall around the furnaces on the operating floor.

Rehired later, Milan was then moved after the blast furnace where he had worked was closed. He went to work in a different facility which was older, with no protective walls erected around the blast furnace. "People can fall into the slag below," he said. "It is especially dangerous during times when production speeds up. When we hear that 'you cannot put a value on the human life' at the mill, it's all empty words."

ArcelorMittal and the USW union work together to prevent safety hazards from being addressed so as not to cut into profit margins, and to isolate and penalize workers who report serious safety hazards. A policy of writing workers up for "near-miss incidents" is used as a way to shift the burden of safety onto the backs of individual workers and create a case to fire them. The USW is entirely complicit and calls these measures "proactive," encouraging them to continue.

"People are afraid to retire from the plant," Milan said. "Recently we were talking about a man who retired and passed away a year later. In this line of work we are exposed to so many carcinogens, so it's not uncommon for that to happen. Workers will pass away from lung cancer or something of the sort.

"One of the biggest problems we have had for generations is that people ingest the poisons that are used in the steelmaking process. The number one way we get sick from pollutants is because we ingest them in our food and drink. People will be drinking a cup of coffee in the mill and meanwhile all of these pollutants are falling into it.

"It's the perspective of the prosperous that these conditions are the cost of doing business. It is one of the reasons that we make the [higher than average] wages we do in this industry, because we are exposed to so many chemicals. The company gives us things like dust masks, and we get tested every year for cadmium levels in our blood by having the toxin levels in our bloodstream measured."

A third-generation steelworker, Milan described his life in Indiana and how the social landscape changed as the corporations began to shut down plants in the region.

"Things have gotten worse in East Chicago since the steel mills closed. I was born and raised there, less than one mile from where ArcelorMittal's main office is, and one and a half miles from the 2SP Plant which is now closed. East Chicago was a vibrant community when I was growing up. There were Lithuanian, Czech, Serbian, African-American and Mexican workers, and many others. I and some of my friends reminisce that we were close to so many cultures. But as the mills were shut down, things began to change.

"The main street, Michigan Avenue, used to have hotels, auto dealerships, grocery stores, but over the years one business after another left. Buildings were unoccupied and torn down. Now there is not a single store. The only one that is left is a sandwich shop that opened 35 years ago. A thriving community is now completely empty—it's filled with vacant blocks. The marina was built 30 years ago because the city wanted to use the land for storing boats. The city actually tried to force the businesses out so they could use the land to build warehouses and places where the boats could be stored, but that never

materialized, so now there are just empty lots.

“Families left the area. As businesses left, the quality of life went down. Now the crime problem is tough; people complain about gangs and are afraid to go outside by themselves.

“When I was growing up, we had two high schools with large marching bands, with 80-100 members. In primary school from fourth grade onward you could be in band or orchestra. Now the students don’t have this opportunity; they have recorders to play, that’s it. It’s a far cry from a violin or a French horn. There is only one central high school and the entire marching band numbered 30—that’s the band, baton twirlers, and flag holders. It’s not just a problem for East Chicago, it affects the surrounding communities as well. Like the issues with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra players [who went] on strike, the problem is that the arts have been underfunded in schools and these conditions are a result of that.

“There was another plant called Union Tank Car in the area which was closed, and not just closed but razed to the ground. The plant was part of the Marmon Group which was owned by the Pritzker family. They used to fly their children there to show them: ‘Here is what you will inherit.’ Some of the guys working there were really offended by this. They closed the East Chicago plant to build a non-union facility in Alexandria, Louisiana. Union Tank Car was then sued by the city of Alexandria, the county and state because the company received a lot of government funding to hire a certain amount of people, but they never hired the amount of people that they had promised.”

Returning to conditions inside the steel mill, Milan said, “Other safety risks are present because they do not take care of the equipment. Preventative maintenance does not exist. As long as we can continue to work and maintain at a certain production level, they don’t care until something breaks down. Also, in this industry they try to throw away as little as possible. That green dumpster-like container in the picture is a backhouse. They take the cadmium and dump it in. It is then sent off-site to a third-party company which mixes it with a refractory and turns it into the coolant we use in the steelmaking process which is then sold back to ArcelorMittal. With steel you need to raise and lower the temperature during the process. On the steel production side there is no way to avoid being exposed to the cadmium. A co-worker has trouble with his renal glands in his kidneys; if there is any increase in the levels he is displaying, he will need kidney dialysis.

“There are two kinds of ladles which are used in steel production: ladles for iron and ladles for steel. The iron ladles are sprayed with coolant, then they must be covered because noxious fumes are generated. The procedure used to be to shut it down and do this in turns, but now, they do this process whenever they want, and if you complain about the fumes, they do not care. They will send you home and you will get a half-point penalty to your attendance. Then when the ladle’s done drying, they remove the cover after a 24-hour minimum

timeframe and the fumes are released again.

“If you go to the company labor police—that is, the union—to get safety issues addressed, you will be isolated and they will try to terminate you because they will blame the problems on you. I have to be very cautious. I didn’t want to drive a front-end loader in the ore fields because I literally must be careful with every single movement I make. There is the potential for accidents; it is a high-traffic area in the ore fields.

“I tried to ask the union to give me a full copy of the 2018 contract but they said that they did not have it. I know they are lying.

“I was asked to run for union griever by some young men who started to work in the blast furnace after I taught them about personal safety. I declined, explaining that the union elections are a popularity contest. I told these guys that we need to blow everything apart and rebuild it. Otherwise we’ll have the same system just being run by different people. I wouldn’t mind being a part of that process, but it won’t happen with the unions.”

Milan’s experiences reflect those of steelworkers worldwide. Based in Luxembourg, ArcelorMittal is the world’s largest integrated steel and mining company. The corporation has over 209,000 employees and operates in over 60 countries. In 2018, its net profit totaled \$5.14 billion. CEO Lakshmi Mittal had a total net worth of \$11 billion, stolen off the backs of workers like Milan who are exploited physically and mentally to generate immense profits from their labor.

There is more than enough money to ensure that every worker around the world has a safe workplace, job security, and fully paid healthcare and retirement benefits. The USW and other unions worldwide refuse to challenge the corporate profit system, making them complicit in its crimes. In order for workers to fight for these gains, they must break from these rotten organizations and form their own rank-and-file committees, aimed at linking up with other steelworkers internationally and teachers, autoworkers, logistics workers and others coming into struggle in the fight to overthrow capitalism and replace it with socialism, a planned economy based on what the working class needs.

The first step in forming these committees is for workers to speak out and share their experiences with the rest of the working class. The *World Socialist Web Site* will do everything it can to give these workers a voice and provide the political platform necessary to link these struggles together. We encourage these brave workers who want to share their stories to contact us today.



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