

Clairton, Pennsylvania residents denounce US Steel pollution

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On December 24, 2018 a fire at the US Steel Clairton Plant in Clairton, Pennsylvania damaged the facility's pollution control equipment. The company, supported by the United Steelworkers union and federal and state governments, continued to operate the facility without functioning pollution controls for months, exposing the local population to dangerous levels of air pollution, particularly sulfur dioxide.

More than two weeks later, after six air quality violations, the Allegheny County Health Department sent out a public health alert advising residents of twenty-two local municipalities to stay inside. Air quality periodically rose to dangerous levels into February. On the morning of February 4, the air quality index (AQI) in nearby McKeesport reached 181, well within the federal "unhealthy" level and worse than the simultaneous level in Beijing, China of 167.

Last month, the health department said it had a draft of a settlement with US Steel, which would not force the steelmaker to replace the coke batteries but only add more pollution controls. The company has still not paid a \$1 million wrist-slap fine.

Emissions of sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere turn into fine particulate matter, which can cause both acute and chronic respiratory symptoms, particularly for children, people with asthma, and other sensitive populations, ultimately shortening lifespans.

After the fire, environmental and health advocates called for the plant to be placed on a "hot idle," in which sections of the plant continues to operate without producing any coke, until the pollution control infrastructure was fixed. US Steel ignored these calls and continued production, arguing that workarounds such as using more cleaner-burning natural gas or flaring coke oven gas would be sufficient to reduce pollution.

The Clairton Plant produces roughly 4.7 million tons of coke per year, making it the largest coke production facility in the United States. It produces more than a third of total US production of 13.8 million tons per year and half of the 9.5 million tons of coke used for steel production in the United States.

The United Steelworkers union (USW) opposed any cessation of production, with Don Furko, president of United Steelworkers Local 1557, arguing, "[I]f U.S. Steel ends up idling batteries, our members will lose their jobs. This will begin a chain of events that will have a devastating impact on them, their families and our communities across the Mon Valley."

The USW has long claimed bowing to every demand of the steel companies would protect the jobs of steelworkers. Over the last four decades, the endless concessions handed over by the USW, its sanctioning of unsafe conditions for workers and dangerous pollution in their communities has not saved a single job. The USW rejects out of hand any common struggle by workers and community residents against the economic blackmail and to defend workers' jobs and the public's health at the same time.

US Steel has clearly been emboldened to flout pollution controls by the Trump administration's war against the Environmental Protection Agency. This is illustrated by the fact that the EPA was essentially absent for the first month after the fire due to the government shutdown from December 22, 2018 through January 25, 2019. Trump's EPA administrators, Scott Pruitt and now Andrew Wheeler, have deep ties to the fossil fuel industry and other polluting industries and have focused their efforts on rolling back existing regulations on emissions of air pollution, climate-warming greenhouse gases, water pollution, and other forms of pollution.

The Clairton facility's compliance has fallen from 94.4 percent in 2014 to 74 percent as of April 2018, indicating a response to the lax enforcement environment under the Trump administration. While the Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) order called for two of the plant's ten coke-producing batteries be placed on hot idle, US Steel has refused to obey the order or pay the fine, challenging it in court and arguing that fixing the problem would be untenable as it would cost as much as \$400 million.

US Steel now claims that the problem has been fixed, and pollution levels are not as high as they were in the weeks immediately following the fire. However, another control room fire broke out on July 17, purportedly caused by a contractor, suggesting that the underlying safety issues remain unresolved.

A WSWS reporting team spoke with residents of Clairton and nearby Glassport about the effects of air pollution from the Clairton Plant.

Mandi, who works in a pizza shop in Clairton, asked "What's the statewide rate of kids with asthma? Both of my babies have asthma. One is 10 months old and they aren't allowed to tell you at that age, but they know. When someone cuts the grass, my 2-year-old can't go outside."

Mandi continued, "I grew up here. We don't have enough supplies and we had to share books. We didn't have computers. We've been promised better education for a long time and never got it," she said.

"The rates of people turning into drug addicts are very high. We don't have EMS [emergency medical services]. An ambulance takes at least 45 minutes to come. You're better off driving yourself."

The mill, once a major source of tax revenue for what was then a prosperous town, now pays essentially no taxes. In 2013, the Clairton Plant's property value was reassessed from \$14.5 million to \$2.5 million, with property taxes falling from \$360,000 per year to \$20,000 or 0.1 percent of the Clairton school district's annual budget of \$14.5 million.

Antoine, a home health care worker from the area, described the situation after the explosion. "I could see at night, the air quality seemed to be a little worse. I knew something was wrong. I also visit people in Clairton. You can tell by the little mist that gets on your car. If it's getting on your car, you know it's getting in what you breathe."

Antoine spoke of the effect of the pollution on his two children. "My son would go out and play basketball in an alley. I'd notice him coming home winded a little bit and a little congested, but we didn't know. I'm just thinking maybe he overdid it. And then a week or two later, we started to hear the reports that were released and that explains it."

Antoine continued, "I blame the health department for being late in letting people know. They said to try to spend as little time outside as possible. How could you tell a kid that when they're off school for the summer? I think that something needs to be done. They need to report. I don't have any respiratory problems, but my son, his asthma flares up more than it used to. I think that might be the cause, but I'm not sure."

Matt, who works at a local pillow factory, spoke about children not being able to play outside. "I'm 50 and sometimes I want to go out and play."

"They need to fix it," Matt said of the plant. "We don't need all that pollution in the air. There's enough stuff in the air as it is. They're putting more in, and that's not healthy for anybody. It doesn't matter if it's a young kid or somebody in their 70s or 80s."

Workers must not be forced to choose between keeping their jobs and poisoning their neighbors. When mismanagement disables pollution controls, a factory should be idled and repaired with workers compensated at full pay. The production of steel in the US and internationally must be based on human need, not profit, by transforming the industry into a public utility, collectively owned and democratically controlled by workers themselves.



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