

ArcelorMittal and state officials hid news of Indiana chemical spill

Jessica Goldstein
19 August 2019

Three northwest Indiana beaches were closed in the Portage, Indiana, area on Friday following a chemical spill at the ArcelorMittal Burns Harbor steel mill, which dumped cyanide and ammonia into the Little Calumet River on Monday, which feeds into Lake Michigan. City and state officials have warned the public to stay out of the water until it is deemed safe.

Ammonium nitrate is mixed with fuel oil and used as an industrial explosive, and when it mixes with water it can cause irritation to the eyes, nose and skin in humans. Cyanide is used in steelmaking to electroplate and clean steel. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cyanide exposure causes harm to humans and other animals by preventing cells from using oxygen, causing the cells to die. It can cause damage to the heart, brain and nerves.

The National Park Service closed the Portage Lakefront and Riverwalk beaches, both of which are a part of Indiana Dunes National Park, known for its high levels of biodiversity. The nearby Ogden Dunes community also closed its beaches and restricted its water intake from Lake Michigan following news of the spill. It is not clear exactly how much of the lake itself was contaminated by the chemicals. Lake Michigan supplies drinking water to several large US metropolitan areas, including northwest Indiana and the greater Chicago metropolitan area.

ArcelorMittal alerted state officials on August 12 about a plume of the toxic chemicals, which had been released into the waterway. The exact day and time of the spill are unknown. The company attributes the spill to a failure in its blast furnace recirculation system. Portage Mayor John Cannon accused the Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM) of failing to notify “city officials and citizens” until August 15, several days later.

The spill killed hundreds of fish, causing a strong, foul odor as they decayed in the harbors around the area, which are open to the public for recreation. Boaters also reported seeing scores of dead fish floating in the water before the community was officially notified of the chemical spill.

The mayor’s office published an official press release dated August 16. The release holds ArcelorMittal responsible for the chemical spill and blames IDEM for failing to communicate the emergency until several days later. However, far from addressing the causes behind the spill or calling for ArcelorMittal to be punished, the mayor’s office offered an impotent statement that the city will take “aggressive action with the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] to ensure the breakdown of communication, like this, does not occur again.”

After the city of Portage press release, the Luxembourg-based steelmaker issued a perfunctory statement in which it apologized and accepted responsibility for the spill. It declared that the blast furnace “recirculating system has been repaired and normal operations have resumed. Although sampling is ongoing, we are confident that the facility’s wastewater system is operating within normal ranges.”

Upon learning of the spill and its cover-up, an ArcelorMittal steelworker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I can’t fake any sort of surprise that something like this occurred, that’s for sure. I’ve worked here [for decades] and the company, through all its different ownerships, has always put on the ‘safety first’ and ‘environmentally friendly’ face toward the public while cutting corners and praying they don’t get caught. As long as we have [US President Donald Trump] in the White House and all his braindead minions blindly following orders we will continue to see more and more environmental disasters.”

In 2017, President Trump handed over even greater power for the corporations to pollute waterways to meet their profit demands by signing an executive order which rolled back the already company-friendly 2015 Clean Water Rule.

ArcelorMittal made \$5.14 billion in profits last year. In April, 49-year-old steelworker Edwin Fleming was killed while operating a railroad engine at ArcelorMittal’s Indiana Harbor Mill in East Chicago, Indiana. ArcelorMittal was fined a paltry \$14,000 by the Indiana Occupational Safety and Health Administration (IOSHA) for its crime.

A former ArcelorMittal steelworker spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* in June about the health risks that steelworkers are exposed to every day in the mill. “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... 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.”

Official state and national environmental safety agencies work in the interests of the big corporations. Workers cannot rely upon these agencies to stop the corporations from putting their lives at risk and destroying the environment and the health conditions of tens of millions of people. ArcelorMittal discharged over 61,000 pounds of cyanide into the Little Calumet River in 2017, an amount which the authorities determine to be “legally acceptable.”

A number of other environmental disasters have occurred in the area in recent years, affecting surrounding working-class communities and fresh water supplies. In 2017, US Steel and Indiana authorities covered up a hexavalent chromium spill at the steelmaker’s Midwest Plant in Portage, which contaminated a waterway that led to Lake Michigan. Information about the spill was concealed for weeks, and neither the company nor the state nor local officials issued any warning to the public.

Earlier that year, Indiana Republican Governor Eric Holcomb declared a disaster at the former US Smelting and Lead Refinery Inc. (USS Lead) site in nearby East Chicago, Indiana, although officials had known for decades that the soil had been contaminated by lead. The working-class residents from a housing development built on top of the lead-contaminated site were told to relocate on short notice with very little compensation.

The United Steelworkers union (USW), which supposedly represents workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal plants in Indiana and throughout the US, has issued no statements condemning ArcelorMittal for poisoning the water in the areas where so many workers and their families live. Far from opposing the undermining of workers’ health and livelihoods—inside or outside the steel mills—the USW and other unions in the US and around the world have colluded with the corporations in the name of making them more “competitive” against their international rivals.

Last fall, the USW forced workers at ArcelorMittal and US Steel to accept a deal that included a pitiful 14 percent wage increase over four years, after the union and company pushed through a three-year wage freeze in 2015. The USW has also been among the most vociferous supporters of

Trump’s trade war measures against China and other countries, which are aimed at driving a wedge between workers in different countries and blocking an internationally coordinated struggle against the giant transnational corporations, which are attacking workers throughout the world.

The USW has long been involved in joint labor-management environmental, health and safety committees where union officials and corporate management work hand-in-hand to cut back on health and safety protections and suppress opposition by workers to unsafe practices.

The fact is the protection of the environment *and* the jobs and living standards of workers is incompatible with the capitalist system, which subordinates social needs to private profit and the relentless struggle by national cliques of capitalists to beat out their rivals in order to control markets, raw materials and access to cheap labor. That is why steelworkers, autoworkers and every section of the working class must adopt an internationalist and socialist strategy.

There are plenty of resources to research, develop and institute safety precautions to ensure that workers’ lives and the environment are not put at risk through the production of industrial waste material. However, the answer to this problem is not looking to the Democratic Party and the phony Green New Deal advanced by its so-called progressive wing, but the development of a politically independent movement of the working class to fight for the replacement of the capitalist system with socialism.

This means putting the means of production—including the global steel industry—into the hands of the working class and reorganizing economic life to meet the needs of all workers on the planet, not the private profit interests of the wealthy few.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact