UK: Inquest adjourned into death of Port Talbot steelworks contractor Justin Day

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A father of three, Justin Day, recently died in a tragic work-related incident at the Tata steelworks in Port Talbot, South Wales.

Port Talbot is the largest steelmaking site in the country employing approximately 4,000 workers.

Around 2 p.m. on September 25, emergency services were called to attend a worker in urgent need of medical attention. Engineer Day, 44, was servicing the hot mill at the upper level of Bay 21 in the giant steel works, when it was accidentally switched on while he was still inside, crushing him.

Despite the efforts of an air ambulance and Hazardous Area Response Team, contractor Day—who hailed from Swansea and was employed by Mii Engineering—succumbed to his injuries.

Colleagues described him as "lovely" and a "wonderful" father. His family said Day "loved his family so much, he was working hard to provide the best for his family." A fundraising page in memory of Day has raised almost £8,000 to support his family.

A post-mortem was carried out on October 2, with the provisional cause of death pending further investigation. The inquest into Day's death at Swansea Civic Centre, was opened and adjourned last Friday until April 2020.

While the events leading to this tragedy are still unknown, the circumstances of a machine switching on with an engineer working inside it points to a disastrous break down in health and safety protocol.

Justin Day's death follows an explosion at the steel works on the morning of April 25, which left two workers seriously injured and residents in the surrounding area badly shaken.

A train carrying molten metal at the site was responsible, causing several huge blasts and a fire. Nearby residents reported their homes shaking, and the explosion could be heard from as far away as 20 miles. Many took to social media with graphic descriptions of the incident.

Someone identified as Paget said, "That must of woke the whole of Port Talbot, really hope everyone's OK in the steel works."

Matthew Kearney posted: "Port Talbot, that was the loudest thing I've ever heard. Woke me sharply, and continued to crash as I came to. Plagued now with worry about the works."

Sky News reported eyewitness Lance Davis: "It sounded like thunder, and that's what woke me up. Then I heard one explosion, and that drew my attention to the window, so I went outside the window and there were another two explosions. It was a massive bubble of orange flame and a big cloud of smoke like a mushroom."

Residents in the adjacent area and workers at the plant were particularly anxious because the steelworks has been dogged by a string of health and safety failures, including a deadly explosion in 2001.

There were three fatalities, and many injured in 2001 following a massive blast and fire at the steelworks. At about 5 p.m. on November 8 that year, an explosion ripped through Blast Furnace Number 5, with such power that it lifted the 5,000-tonne structure around 0.75 metres from its base, discharging hot gases. Flames tore 100 feet into the sky, emitting thick smoke into the surrounding area. Around 80 firefighters were deployed to the scene.

Andrew Hutin, 20, Stephen Galsworthy, 25, and Len Radford, 53, lost their lives and five other workers ended up on life support machines due to the severity of their injuries.

Then owner Corus was subsequently fined £3 million for health and safety breaches. Terry Rose, the Health and Safety (HSE) Executive Director for Wales, commented: "The explosion at the Blast Furnace Number 5 was a stark reminder that safety needs to be managed at a corporate level."

No individual, however, was prosecuted for the disaster in 2001, and the guidance was consistently ignored, as the

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subsequent tragic incidents confirm.

On May 7, 2005, a 53-year-old locomotive driver was crushed to death at the plant. Bryan Robbins, who had 34 years' experience on the job, was crushed between his vehicle and a doorframe. A verdict of accidental death was returned despite the coroner declaring there would have been no dangers had health and safety procedures been followed.

In April 2006, steelworker Kevin Downey died horrifically after falling into super-heated molten liquid, while disoriented by a cloud of steam. In 2012, Tata was fined £500,000 for his death. On behalf of the HSE, Rupert Lowe said problems with steam were well known at the plant but had not been rectified.

There was another avoidable accident in August 2006. Michael Down luckily escaped fatal injuries when his arm became trapped in machinery.

Given this long record of what amounts to criminal and corporate negligence, the assurances of the company—backed by the trade unions and right-wing local Labour MP Stephen Kinnock—of its intention to prioritise the safety of the workforce after this latest tragedy ring hollow.

Tata announced a "full investigation" has begun into the death of Justin Day. Kinnock tweeted, "I have just spoken with Tata, who will of course be launching an investigation." Roy Rickhuss, the general secretary of the trade union at the plant, Community, said: "We will be pressing Tata Steel to carry out a full investigation and ensuring that all lessons are learnt and procedures and processes are reviewed and necessary changes are implemented so all workers at the Port Talbot plant are safe at work."

The Port Talbot plant is part of Tata Steel Europe, the UK's largest steel company, employing over 8,000 in the UK, along with thousands in other sites across Europe. It is a subsidiary of multinational conglomerate Tata Group, one of India's largest companies.

Last year, the US introduced trade war tariffs directed against steel from China and South Korea due to a glut on the world market, on the pretext that they are dumping steel. The prospect of Brexit, with the UK leaving the EU as soon as October 31, threatens to further intensify the economic dislocation globally.

The other major steel producer in the UK, British Steel—which employs 5,000—recently won a reprieve after being declared insolvent in May. A Turkish buyer came forward but the "rescue" plan will involve a productivity drive and hundreds of redundancies.

Due to increasing global economic competition from China, South Korea and Russia and the introduction of new technology in the production of steel, the Tata Steel group has been operating at a loss for several years. To offset this, Tata will intensify the exploitation of its workforce—which can only exacerbate already dangerous conditions at work—and has introduced a consolidation strategy. This includes shutting down specialist production and focussing on basic steel production, centred at the Port Talbot facility.

Last month, the company announced the closure of two specialised steel production sites in Britain—Orb Electrical Steels located in Newport, Wales, and the Wolverhampton Engineering Steels Service centre. Three hundred eighty jobs are to go in Wales and 26 job in Wolverhampton and some at its sales centre in Bolton.

Roy Rickhuss of the Community steelworkers' union responded to the latest job threats by complaining that the unions were not consulted about the plans beforehand. "There has been no consultation about this proposal either at UK or European level and company management should hang their heads in shame in the way this has come about," he said.

In every country, unions support the need for speedup, increased productivity, rationalisation, which involves redundancies, and trade war tariffs. These pit workers internationally against each other in a race to the bottom in terms of wages and conditions to "Save our Steel." Labour is equally committed to defending the national interest—i.e., the profits of UK-based companies. This nationalist programme is paid for by the working class suffering job losses, more dangerous conditions at work and an increasing number of work-related fatalities.

To fight back, workers must form their own democratically controlled rank-and-file committees, independent of the corporate-controlled unions. These must be based on a socialist perspective and reach out to steelworkers across the globe in a unified struggle.

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