

Fourth steelworker in three years dies at ArcelorMittal in East Chicago, Indiana

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On Wednesday afternoon, 71-year-old steelworker George Salinas was killed after being hit by a coil tractor at ArcelorMittal's Indiana Harbor Mill in East Chicago, Indiana. The tragic death is the fourth at the mill since 2017. Since its opening in 1902, there have been 393 fatalities at the mill, which was run by Inland Steel until it was acquired by ArcelorMittal in 1998.

In April 2019, Edwin Fleming was killed when the railroad engine he was operating struck a railcar on the adjacent track in the No. 7 blast furnace raw materials yard. Alfredo Cardena was killed in a buggy accident at the No. 3 Continuous Annealing Line in December 2017. Willie Batteast was killed in a crane accident in March 2017.

Indiana Department of Labor spokesperson Stephanie McFarland told the press Wednesday that the Indiana Occupational Safety and Health Administration (IOSHA) will begin a safety-compliance inspection, which will take 30-90 days to complete. ArcelorMittal and the United Steelworkers (USW) union said they were launching a joint investigation into Salinas's death.

None of these investigations will produce anything more than a cover-up of the real causes of Salinas's death and little or no restitution to his family. In the case of Edwin Fleming's death, the state fined ArcelorMittal \$14,000, well below the late Fleming's annual wages. This was an infinitesimal fraction of the steel giant's 2019 profits of \$1.73 billion and CEO Lakshmi Mittal's estimated net worth of \$9.4 billion.

Far from opposing unsafe conditions, the USW has been a faithful partner of ArcelorMittal, jointly operating various labor-management environmental, health and safety committees whose main purpose is to safeguard profits and suppress any opposition by workers to unsafe conditions.

On July 16, a major explosion occurred at Blast Furnace D at ArcelorMittal's nearby Burns Harbor mill. A video posted to Facebook and viewed worldwide showed the huge furnace in flames. While the blast sent large chunks of burning hot white refractory across the grounds of the mill, company and local officials said no one was hurt.

White refractory lines the interior of the blast furnace to protect its shell from the super-hot temperatures needed during raw steel manufacture. Not only does this indicate major damage, but suggests that it was in the making, perhaps as the result of long periods of neglect of maintenance and disregard to safety and temperature regulation guidelines by the corporate management and the USW. The union's District 7 Director Mike Millsap basically shrugged off the potential disaster, telling the *Northwest Indiana Times*, "it could have been much worse."

Having lost money from the two-month shutdown of the auto industry due to the wave of wildcat strikes over the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in March, the steel companies are rushing to reopen partially idled plants, which pose their own safety problems. US Steel recently announced it would restart another blast furnace at Gary Works in Indiana to meet increased demand, including from Ford's Chicago Assembly Plant. Steel production in the Great Lakes region climbed up to 450,000 tons last week, up from around 400,000 a week a few weeks ago, according to the American Iron and Steel Institute.

Since the 1980s, the USW has pushed through one concession contract after another, which have significantly reduced the living standards of steelworkers and undermined their safety. Hundreds of thousands of jobs were slashed, while remaining workers, including the growing army of lower-paid

contractors, were forced to work ever longer hours.

In 2018, the USW forced workers at ArcelorMittal and US Steel to accept a labor agreement, which included a mere 14 percent raise over four years. This followed a three-year wage freeze accepted by the USW in the 2015 contracts.

Although its profits in 2019 remained over \$1 billion, this was a sharp fall from ArcelorMittal's 2018 profits of over \$9 billion. In June, the World Steel Association predicted that global demand for steel would drop by 6.4 percent year over year in 2020 and recover only 3.8 percent in 2021, a net loss of 2.6 percent over the next year and a half. Analysts pointed to the disruption of supply chains and manufacturing demand, particularly from the global auto industry, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

ArcelorMittal, along with other steel corporations and banks which back their global expansion, will seek to offset these financial setbacks through ruthless job- and cost-cutting while increasing the exploitation of their remaining global workforce. The Luxembourg-based company has already laid off thousands of workers worldwide, including 944 workers at its Indiana mills. This will further exacerbate safety problems for the remaining workers who are being forced to work longer hours.

In a statement, Mittal recently wrote: "From a business perspective we will have to continue to be flexible in terms of adapting to the situation in which we find ourselves. Demand has dropped considerably ... we must remain mindful of the difficult business environment and the need to continue to take the right decisions in response."

This means that alongside cuts to wages, jobs, retirement and health care benefits, the company will undermine health and safety measures, including training, protective equipment, and maintenance.

For decades, the USW claimed endless concessions were necessary to make steelmakers more "competitive" against their international rivals. As it colluded with the steel bosses in the restructuring and consolidation of the steel industry, the USW blamed "foreign steelmakers" not capitalism for the destruction of steelworkers' jobs, living standards and working conditions.

Now the USW is fully aligned with the Trump administration's anti-Chinese campaign, along with the

Democrats, which threatens to descend from a trade war into a military confrontation between the two nuclear-armed countries, threatening humanity with destruction.

Joe Biden, the Democrats' presumptive presidential nominee in the 2020 election, has repeatedly attacked Trump as being "too weak" on China.

In March, Chinese steelmaker China Baowu Group overtook ArcelorMittal as the world's largest steelmaker by production. Overall, China leads the world in steel production by a vast margin, with about 54 percent of the world's crude steel output. In May, the US fell to fifth in the world, after output fell by more than third.

The struggle for a safe and comfortable workplace, an end to layoffs and firing of workers for unjust reasons, and a substantial raise in wages and benefits for all workers requires a break with the reactionary and nationalist trade unions and political parties and the formation of new organizations capable of linking workers together to fight for their class interests on a global scale.

Steelworkers should follow the example of autoworkers in Michigan and Ohio who have formed rank-and-file safety committees independent of the corrupt United Auto Workers union to take control of health and safety into their own hands. Such committees formed by steelworkers should link up with autoworkers and other sections of workers fighting the homicidal back-to-work and back-to-school campaigns that have led to record numbers of new infections and deaths.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party will do everything possible to help steelworkers who want to form rank-and-file safety committees. To learn more, contact us today.



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