

Indiana steelworker Troy Allen, 45, dies while working at US Steel's Gary Works mill

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Troy Allen, 45-year-old steelworker, husband and father of two, passed away while working at US Steel's Gary Works mill in Gary, Indiana late on December 12. Allen lived with his family in Portage, Indiana and is remembered by coworkers and family on Facebook as a caring, upbeat person and dedicated longtime worker at the mill.

Allen suffered a medical emergency at the plant, according to the *Northwest Indiana Times*. He was rushed to Methodist Hospital's Northlake campus by US Steel's in-house emergency medical services, where he was pronounced dead. The Lake County Coroner was summoned to the hospital shortly thereafter.

One week after his death, no further details have emerged as to the circumstances that led to his condition while working at the mill.

At the time of this writing, there has not yet been any investigation into Mr. Allen's death announced by the state or federal Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA), the United Steelworkers (USW), local authorities or US Steel management.

The *World Socialist Web Site* contacted the Office of the Lake County Coroner Friday morning and received no further details other than what had been released to the press December 12. The WSWS was told that a full autopsy report will take up to eight to 10 weeks to determine the cause of death.

The WSWS made several attempts to reach USW Local 1066 in Gary, Indiana for comment on the conditions and status of investigation into Allen's cause of death, but each time was given the run-around, told that no one was available to give comment and that reporters should contact the corporation. Neither the International nor Local 1066 union officials have acknowledged Allen's death on their websites or social media accounts.

US Steel spokeswoman Amanda Malkowski stated to the press that Allen's death was "not work-related." However, as autoworkers, Amazon workers, and many other workers know, the conditions in America's industrial workplaces are such that workers can and will develop any number of

chronic health conditions related to fatigue, overwork, exposure to hazardous chemicals, and stress.

Last year, a worker at ArcelorMittal's Indiana Harbor mill (now owned and operated by Cleveland-Cliffs) described to the *World Socialist Web Site* how workers are exposed to carcinogens daily as part of the process of producing raw steel under capitalism.

"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 [wealthy] that these conditions are the cost of doing business ... we get tested every year for cadmium levels in our blood by having the toxin levels in our bloodstream measured."

As with all of the other preventable injuries and deaths at the major raw steel producers in the US, the USW is playing a treacherous role in seeking to cover up the real cause behind Mr. Allen's death. Echoing the claim by US Steel that working conditions did not have a hand in Allen's death, USW District 7 Director Mike Millsap reportedly told the *Northwest Indiana Times* that "there was no industrial accident or any issue with workplace safety."

Workers will not believe this specious inference that conditions are safe for workers at US Steel's mills. Not only is the USW keeping in line with its history of seeking to absolve the corporation of any responsibility, its interest lies in holding back an outpouring of anger by steelworkers across the region that could get out of their hands.

In 2016, the USW worked with US Steel and local government authorities to sweep under the rug the conditions which led to the tragic death of 31-year-old steelworker Jonathan Arrizola. After his death, it was revealed by his widow that he had been working "70-90 hours per week and conditions were getting so dangerous that he was actively looking for another job before his death."

The layoff of 275 maintenance workers at the Gary Works mill, a cost-cutting measure aided and abetted by the USW, played a role in Arrizola's death. An anonymous worker from Gary Works told the WSWS at the time that maintenance crews were so short-staffed that preventive maintenance was not being performed and workers were given minimal training before being required to work on some of the most dangerous jobs. Many worked on jobs before they had the chance to complete training programs because the company shut the programs down, with no resistance from the union.

Like their fellow workers at auto and meatpacking plants and other workplaces across the world, steelworkers at US Steel's Gary Works mill and Midwest mill in nearby Portage, are being forced back to work under conditions where little if any safety measures have been taken to protect workers from the spread of COVID-19.

A *Chicago Post-Tribune* article Thursday noted that by Dec. 15 there were already 457 confirmed cases combined at both plants, a significant increase from 419 cases reported just five days before. Workers complained that cleaning crews "never come to sanitize the crew shanty. And in some cases they are forcing you to work where you have less than six feet distance" from others. Workers acknowledged that "the company cares about only one thing—production."

While US Steel external communications manager Meghan Cox has proclaimed the company is "doing everything we can regarding precautions during a pandemic" and that "steelmaking is an essential industry and we simply can't stop production," the USW has remained silent on the spread of COVID-19 in the mills. It has not called for a shutdown of the mills with full compensation for all workers until the pandemic is under control, despite the billions in profits made by US Steel off the backs of workers over the past four years, and the reality of overproduction of steel worldwide, at the center of trade wars involving the United States, China and other major economies.

Allen's tragic death occurred during the same week that US Steel announced that it will move forward to acquire the remaining stake of Osceola, Arkansas-based recycled steel manufacturer Big River Steel for \$774 million.

After the passage of the 1978 "Labor Management Cooperation Act," the USW has been involved in joint labor-management health and environmental safety committees, working directly with the management at both US Steel and ArcelorMittal to improve the "competitiveness," that is, profitability, of the mills through the erosion and elimination of programs that protect workers' safety and health.

In 2018, the USW pushed through a pattern of sellout contracts with Cleveland-Cliffs, ArcelorMittal and US Steel after isolating workers at the different corporations and

refusing to honor unanimous strike votes at the latter two steelmakers. The USW used nationalist denunciations of China and other countries, where workers also face dangerous conditions, in order to justify the significant concessions in these contracts, including no guarantees of health and safety improvements or job protections, ultimately resulting in thousands of layoffs since the contracts were forced through.

In its most recent betrayal of the working class, the USW, with the Teamsters and other unions, betrayed a 10-month strike of 1,800 Asarco copper mine workers in Arizona and Texas in August. The unions shut down the strike and forced the miners to return to work under management's terms, which included pay cuts, increases to out-of-pocket health care costs and no real improvements to health and safety conditions.

Neither can any trust be placed in state or federal OSHA to uncover the truth behind all of the circumstances that led to Troy Allen's death, or bring about restitution to the grieving family. OSHA has filed citations in just 2 percent of cases related to thousands of complaints of employer violations against COVID-19 safety protocols since the beginning of the pandemic, resulting in a mere \$3,504,345 in fines, according to *Industrial Safety & Hygiene News*.

Even in cases when OSHA finds a company at fault for a worker's death, it issues minimal fines and corrections to safety protocols, which it has no real ability to enforce.

Steelworkers around the country must demand the truth: What were the causes and circumstances of Allen's death? They should follow the lead of teachers and autoworkers worldwide who have built rank-and-file safety committees to fight against unsafe working conditions.

These committees will serve to link up the struggles of steelworkers with other sections of workers worldwide in a common struggle to prevent the needless sacrifice of workers' lives and livelihoods in the name of private profit. These committees would demand the immediate shutdown of nonessential production, which, notwithstanding claims by US Steel, includes the steel industry. The billions made by the steel companies and other giant corporations during the pandemic must be seized to fully compensate workers during a shutdown and to fund a massive public health campaign to bring the virus under control.



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