

Electric arc furnace explosion at Pueblo, Colorado steel mill leaves eight workers seriously injured

Jessica Goldstein
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Eight steelworkers were injured after an electric arc furnace exploded Saturday evening at the Evraz Rocky Mountain Steel Plant in Pueblo, Colorado, about 100 miles north of the New Mexico border. Seven of the injured workers had to walk themselves out of the plant and one later had to drive himself to the emergency room.

Of three critically injured workers, two were transported to Parkview hospital to be treated for respiratory injuries and another was taken to a burn unit in Denver to be treated for burns on their hands and face. At this time, there are still no details released about the identities of the victims. All eight are expected to survive.

The Pueblo Fire Department responded to emergency calls about a fire at the mill that occurred after 5 p.m. local time and discovered that a furnace had exploded. Assistant Chief Keith Miller of the Pueblo Fire Department explained to KKTV11 News that when the fire department arrived, they found “130 tons of steel in that furnace at max temperature,” or approximately 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit, the temperature for pouring steel.

According to the fire department, the likely cause is that water was introduced to the furnace at a high temperature, causing the explosion. “It sounds like they had a cooling system failure, which is when water was introduced, which is potentially what caused the explosion,” Miller stated, adding that the crew had to wait for the steel in the furnace to cool in order to go into the plant and fight the fire.

The plant remains idled for an indefinite period of time while the investigation is underway, pointing to extensive damage. KRDO News reported that the fire

from the explosion burned on three different levels of the building at the plant.

The Pueblo Fire Department was not able to give comments to the *World Socialist Web Site* regarding any developments since Saturday. Evraz Fire Protection Unit, which is carrying out an investigation, was not able to be reached for comment at the time of this writing. The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has joined the investigation into the cause of the blast as of Sunday.

The serious explosion had originally been downplayed by the company. David Light, vice president of operations at Evraz, originally told CBS4 Denver Saturday that what occurred was a “mild explosion” and the workers injuries were “minor.”

The reality is much different. Residents reported that they could hear the blast inside of their homes from a distance. Miller stated that “The explosion itself was pretty powerful, definitely. I wouldn’t call it a minor explosion.”

Local station KOAA spoke to an anonymous injured worker, who stated, “It definitely wasn’t a minor explosion like some have said,” and said that workers suffered “burns, cuts and breathing issues from the dust in the air.” He continued, “when one of us is hurting, we all are hurting.”

Evraz Rocky Mountain Steel Mill is a particularly dangerous place to work, according to the results of 14 OSHA inspections over the past decade. A 2012 inspection resulted in a slap-on-the-wrist penalty of \$8,000 for the death of a machine operator who was killed after being run over by an industrial truck at the plant. One Evraz worker described the mill as a “way scary place” in response to a Pueblo Firefighters IAFF

Local #3 Facebook page post about the recent explosion.

In 2007, an explosion occurred at an electric-arc furnace operated by steelmaker ISG Plate, LLC in Coatesville, PA (now owned by Cleveland-Cliffs) under circumstances apparently similar to the Evraz incident. OSHA issued eight serious violations as a result of its investigation.

Details of the ISG Plate inspection report state that “It is believed that a stray electrical arc created a significant internal water leak on one of the water-cooled shell panels. The spraying water accumulated within the furnace. When the temperature of the molten steel was finally up to pouring temperature (approximately 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit), the employees found that the furnace’s tap hole was blocked. There were several unsuccessful attempts to unblock this tap hole.

“The employees’ final attempt involved putting a lit oxygen lance down into the tap hole and burning clear whatever was causing the block. During this activity, the EAF violently erupted. After the bath of molten steel solidified, it was observed that it contained a largely intact bale of scrap steel. ... This bale probably fell into the molten steel bath in the same area where the water had been spraying and accumulating, causing the accumulated water to be engulfed by the molten steel. This water rapidly turned to superheated steam that developed vast pressure. The release of this pressurized steam when it broke through the surface of the molten metal caused the furnace to explode.”

According to the report, three workers received extensive steam burns and one died next day.

A lack of basic safety measures contributed to the accident. According to the report: “At the time of the incident, the three workers were not wearing high-heat coats and hoods. The employee using the oxygen lance was blown completely off the furnace spout platform and into the pit approximately 30 feet below. There was no guardrail on the platform at the time of the incident. There were no written procedures for clearing a blocked tap hole. There were no written procedures for what to do when there was significant water in the furnace.”

The disaster exposes the United Steelworkers union’s complicity in the stripping away of basic safety measures by the major steelmakers in order to

accumulate as much profit as possible. Like the Evraz plant, workers at the Coatesville ISG plant are members of the USW. After the accident, USW Local 2102 President Eric Ludwig issued terse remarks on the local’s Facebook page, which avoided assigning any responsibility for the disaster to the company.

The USW is soliciting donations on an individual basis for the injured workers and their families who are expected to face financial hardship due to the unplanned-for emergency. In other words, the USW is leaving it up to workers to help shoulder the financial burden of their coworkers.

Since March 30, 1,300 steelworkers across five northeastern states have been on strike at Allegheny Technologies, Inc. (ATI), and 650 refinery workers at the ExxonMobil refinery in Beaumont, Texas have been locked out since May 1. Around 2,500 steelworkers in Quebec, also members of the USW, have been on strike against ArcelorMittal since May 10. The USW is working to isolate these struggles in order to push through concessions contracts at all three companies. In spite of having over \$150 million in its strike fund, the USW did not begin to pay striking ATI workers a meager \$150 a week in strike benefits until May, which has deliberately been done to wear down the workers’ resolve and has forced many workers to take on separate jobs to make ends meet.



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