

Young steelworker seriously injured by steel coil at Cleveland-Cliffs Indiana Harbor Mill

Jessica Goldstein**17 August 2022**

A young steelworker was seriously injured at the Cleveland-Cliffs Indiana Harbor Mill in East Chicago, Indiana on July 28. The worker was pinned under a steel coil at the mill on the man-made peninsula in Lake Michigan, according to the *Northwest Indiana Times*.

Coworkers attempted to free the worker from the coil, which rolled onto his lower body and broke his femur. The worker was taken to the University of Chicago Medicine hospital on Chicago's south side for treatment and was in stable condition, according to United Steelworkers (USW) District 7 Director Mike Millsap.

The *Times* reported that the injured worker was a recent high school graduate. The age and identity of the worker are being kept from the press, with Cleveland-Cliffs spokesperson Patricia Persico citing a company "standard privacy protocol."

Neither Millsap nor USW Local 1010 officials made any public comments expressing sympathy with the injured worker or his coworkers who witnessed the traumatic event. Neither Local, District or International Facebook pages or websites even mentioned the accident.

On July 26, two days before the young worker was injured, 46-year-old Wessley Blanton was killed at Cleveland-Cliffs Middletown Works in Middletown, Ohio while working in the hot strip mill. Cleveland-Cliffs acquired the mills as part of its acquisition of AK Steel in 2020, the same year the company acquired ArcelorMittal USA to become North America's largest producer of raw steel.

Blanton died of head trauma while he was performing routine maintenance, according to the Butler County Coroner's Office. The company issued a mealy-mouthed statement of sympathy to the press. The death was ruled an "accident" after a joint investigation by the corporation and International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 1943. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is conducting its own investigation into

Blanton's death, which will take at least six months to complete.

In response to the tragedy in Ohio, for which Cleveland-Cliffs and the IAM bear joint responsibility, local president Shawn Coffey could only say it was "an unfortunate accident."

Dangerous conditions have hardly improved at Indiana Harbor since the Cleveland-Cliffs takeover. OSHA has reported one safety referral, one safety complaint, and two unspecified safety inspections at the Indiana Harbor mill since Cleveland-Cliffs began operating it in September 2020. The young worker's injury has not yet been recorded in the OSHA Establishment Search database. OSHA carried out nine inspections from January 2018 to September 2020 when ArcelorMittal owned and operated the mill, which included the investigation into two workplace fatalities for which the corporation faced no more than wrist slap fines.

In response to the injury at Indiana Harbor, the USW and Cleveland-Cliffs are also carrying out a joint investigation. As in every instance in which the union and management have collaborated on "investigations," this will be a cover-up. The USW long ago abandoned any struggle against the corporations and adopted the corporatist program of labor-management partnership. Joint safety committees regularly sacrifice safety to corporate profit.

The last national collective bargaining agreement between ArcelorMittal USA and the USW was pushed through behind the backs of workers in 2018 after the union blocked a nationwide strike against US Steel and ArcelorMittal USA. The USW defied unanimous strike votes and signed a four-year deal, which did not include a single protective measure for workers' jobs.

After the cutting of the labor force to the bone, the conditions of the remaining workers are even worse. With explicit language in the USW contract, US Steel and

ArcelorMittal were free to hire low-paid temp labor with few benefits to fill positions. Fewer workers and high productivity demands in the mills have translated into long hours, fatigue, injury and death.

Four steelworkers were killed at the Indiana Harbor mill between 2017 and 2020. The recent accident, which could have been fatal, further discredits the “safety first” claims of the USW. On August 11, USW International President Tom Conway told delegates at the union’s national convention in Las Vegas that “the union’s priority must always be making sure that workers come home safely at the end of their shifts.” This is a slap in the face to every worker who has had to work forced overtime, risk their health from exposure to high temperatures and carcinogens, been injured or lost loved ones and coworkers due to the concessions contracts signed by the USW behind their backs.

Since its acquisitions of AK Steel and ArcelorMittal USA in 2020, Cleveland-Cliffs has increased gross profits over fivefold, raking in \$4.5 billion in 2021 compared to \$809 million in 2018. In all corporate acquisitions and mergers under capitalism, corporate executives and major shareholders squeeze as much profit out of a transaction as they can. The workers suffer the consequences of cuts to staffing and safety.

Negotiations are currently underway between the USW and US Steel, Cleveland-Cliffs’ main rival in the US raw steel market. The negotiations at US Steel will set the pattern for the concessions that the USW will work out to take from workers at Cleveland-Cliffs. Contracts for 25,000 at both companies expire on September 1.

The USW has kept workers in the dark about bargaining, as they did in the 2018 steel negotiations and more recently in the negotiations with US oil corporations at the beginning of this year.

The production of steel in the United States is becoming more and more cutthroat. To secure a greater share of profits, both US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs will do anything possible to cut pay and working conditions for workers and slash jobs. The USW had demonstrated that it will be a willing partner in carrying out whatever cuts the corporations demand to remain competitive, even if it comes at the expense of workers’ wages, health and lives. Its policies of labor-management collusion prevent it from effectively carrying out a real fight to end unsafe conditions.

The class character of the union was on full display during its convention, where the top representatives of the US ruling elite, including US President Joe Biden, Vice

President Kamala Harris and US Labor Secretary Marty Walsh, all gave remarks addressing the union as a partner in suppressing the struggle of the working class for higher wages and safe working conditions. The US ruling elite relies more and more on collusion with the unions so it can carry out plans to ramp up war production and crack down on opposition from the working class at home.

The Biden administration sees the entire AFL-CIO apparatus as a key element of keeping the working class chained to US war aims against Russia and China. In the weeks before the USW blocked a national strike of oil workers, USW President Tom Conway held a virtual meeting with the Biden administration days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Conway blocked a strike and boasted that he reached a “responsible contract” that did not add to “inflationary pressures.”

The fight for safe working conditions requires the building of independent rank-and-file committees in the steel mills, in opposition to the corporatist policies of the trade unions. It will require that steelworkers in North America link up their fight with the struggles of steelworkers in China, Russia and Eastern Europe, where the US is setting its sights on war. Workers must fight by uniting globally against their class enemy—the global corporations and finance institutions—that sacrifice workers’ health and lives for profit.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is linking up the fight of steelworkers in North America and worldwide, along with the auto, energy, mining, manufacturing and other workers.



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