# Another serious accident at Thyssenkrupp Steel following death of worker Refat Süleyman

**Dietmar Gaisenkersting**
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Germany's big corporations are using the mounting economic crisis to maximise their profits while workers foot the bill with their lives and health.

Two serious industrial accidents have been reported at the Duisburg plant of Thyssenkrupp Steel during the past eight weeks. In mid-October, a 26-year-old cleaning worker died, and just over a month later, a 23-year-old electrician was critically injured.

The electrician was crushed by a slab ferry weighing several tonnes at a furnace in the company's hot strip mill at around 8 p.m. on November 21. He was supposed to carry out repairs while operations continued. Contrary to regulations, the young man was alone. The shift coordinator is said to have been aware that the plant manager had sent the young electrician to do this repair.

It remains unclear how long the 23-year-old lay at the scene of the accident with serious injuries before he was discovered. In hospital he fought for his life for over a week. He is now said to be on the road to recovery, but will be left with permanent impairment to his health.

A little over a month earlier, a young temporary worker, Refat Süleyman, died under as yet unexplained circumstances. On October 14, the 26-year-old suffocated in a basin for industrial waste, sludge and slag. He was only discovered three days after his disappearance.

The police and the company works council have declared both cases "tragic accidents" for which the victims themselves were responsible. Police spokesperson Jonas Tepe said of the young electrician's accident: "We can rule out the possibility of someone else being to blame." The police reacted as hastily as they had done in the case of Refat Süleyman's death. The message was clear in both cases: the victims themselves were at fault.

The talk of "tragic accidents," "human error" etc., is meant to whitewash the system responsible for these deaths as well as those who benefit. This year alone there have been at least five fatal accidents at Thyssenkrupp Stahl in Germany, as well as other accidents, some of which have resulted in serious, permanent injuries.

The victims are not responsible for the tragic accidents at the steelworks. The system of profit maximisation at any price—even at the price of workers' lives—is to blame. In order to cut costs, the Thyssenkrupp group has been cutting jobs for years.

The personnel director of the Thyssenkrupp parent company, former North Rhine-Westphalian IG Metall district leader Oliver Burkhard, proudly announced three weeks ago that company "restructuring" was almost complete. By this he means that 10,000 of a planned 13,000 jobs have now been wiped out. "We are thus slowly leaving the restructuring phase necessary for reorganisation behind us and can concentrate on focused and 'normal' productivity increases," Burkhard commented.

The measures to cut costs include the widespread use of low wage temporary workers who are poorly equipped for the tasks they are assigned, which includes cleaning and other assignments in dangerous areas.

Refat Süleyman was one of the victims of this system. He was one of up to 4,500 temporary and contract workers who work alongside the approximately 13,000 regular employees every day at

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the Duisburg steelworks, which is five times the size of the Principality of Monaco. The works council maintains its own committee to deal with so-called “external employees” (”Eigen und Fremd”).

In addition to the exploitation of temporary workers, management is seeking to slash costs by rationalising away 1,300 jobs in Duisburg, mainly in the white-collar sector. The constant job cuts among steelworkers in recent years have ensured that there is now a shortage of staff and the Duisburg main plant is currently looking for 220 steelworkers.

Workers report that because of short staffing, plants and furnaces are constantly standing idle. As a result, the company is losing millions of euros and the pressure on workers to keep production going, no matter the cost, is all the greater. It is due to this pressure that dangerous work and repairs are carried out alone—sometimes with deadly consequences.

In the event of a production stoppage, repair workers are put under enormous pressure by management to make sure production can resume as soon as possible. This was case on the night the 23-year-old electrician was seriously injured.

The WSWS has reported repeatedly on workplace deaths in Germany, including the case of the management coverup of a worker death this past summer at the Amazon warehouse in the East German city of Leipzig.

In Germany, 510 people were killed at work last year alone. This is the price workers pay for the enrichment of shareholders and managers.

The same pressures prevail in US industrial mills and workplaces, where the deaths of workers in accidents are routinely covered up by management in collusion with the unions and state regulatory agencies.

While this murderous drive for production at all costs in the factories, and disregard for safety, leads to many victims, at the same time it makes shareholders and managers like Burkhard, whose multi-million contract was only recently extended, rich.

The drive to keep blast furnaces running non-stop has fueled the current inflated price of steel. Only three weeks ago, Thyssenkrupp AG announced it had been able to increase its profits to €1.2 billion in the 2021/22 financial year—mainly due to higher prices for steel. Sales increased by 21 percent to €41.1 billion.

These profits flow to shareholders, of course, not to the workers. For the first time in four years, Thyssenkrupp will pay a dividend to its shareholders. The company has, meanwhile, rejected the proposal for a special inflation compensation payment of €3,000 per employee at its steel subsidiary.

The trade unions and their affiliated works councils in the big corporations however, are able to share in a portion of the profits generated by the brutal workplace regime, either directly, in the case of Oliver Burkhard, or indirectly through the high salaries, protection against dismissal and time off work for thousands of works councillors. This does not prevent these same bureaucrats from time to time denouncing increasing work stress and its consequences, ignoring the fact that they themselves help to organise and impose it.

An end to such murderous exploitation cannot be achieved through the unions and works councils, only in a struggle against them. Workers seeking to end job cuts and intolerable levels of work, and fight for decent wages and health and safety must organise independently in action committees to wage a real fight. The WSWS will lend every assistance to workers seeking to form such committees. You can get in touch with us via WhatsApp at +491633378340.

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