

From the archives: “Death of a steelworker” (February 19, 1973)

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The World Socialist Web Site is reprinting below an article from February 19, 1973 on the death of Rick Hertzig, a steelworker who was horrifically killed on the job at a US Steel mill in Lorain, Ohio. The article was written by David North, current WSWs International Editorial Board Chairman and then a leading member of the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (US). It originally appeared in The Bulletin, the newspaper of the Workers League.

Hertzig, only 20 years old at the time, was killed when he was crushed by a door machine that he could not see because of blinding steam throughout the area. A newly-hired worker, Hertzig was placed in a particularly dangerous part of the plant, without adequate training and no safety precautions. As the article states, “Rick did not die in an accident. He was murdered by US Steel in the course of its ruthless drive for profits.”

The circumstances of Hertzig’s death were entirely covered up by US Steel and by the bureaucracy of the United Steel Workers, both at the local level and by the national leadership under then-president I.W. Abel.

Hertzig’s death more than 50 years ago resonates powerfully with the conditions that still confront workers in the United States. Indeed, his death closely parallels that of 63-year-old Stellantis autoworker Ronald Adams at Dundee Engine Plant, who was crushed by a gantry crane in April.

In recent months, there have been a string of workplace fatalities, including the horrific death in a meatgrinder this month of a 19-year old meatpacking worker in southern California; the heat related deaths of two postal workers; and many others. Together, they cast a harsh light on the dirty secret of American capitalism: the daily killing of workers for profit.

According to official government figures, more than 5,000 workers are killed on the job every year in the United States. In 2023, one worker died every 99 minutes. Even these staggering figures are recognized by federal officials as significant undercounts.

From the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in 1911, to the deaths of thousands of miners in collapses and gas explosions, as well as the countless condemned to slow and painful deaths from black lung and other occupational illnesses, the physical destruction of workers has always been treated as part of the “cost of doing business” under American capitalism. In 1845, Friedrich Engels gave this reality its proper name: “social murder.”

Hertzig was killed amid a major upsurge in the class struggle. The early 1970s saw mass strikes by autoworkers, steelworkers, truck drivers, postal workers, miners and others. This growing rebellion was triggered by the eruption of a historic crisis of American capitalism, above all marked by the collapse of the Bretton Woods system at the heart of world finance.

The ruling class responded with a massive upsurge political reaction, spearheaded by the Nixon administration.

Internationally, this was the period of the U.S. escalation in Vietnam and the CIA-backed installation of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile. Within the United States, antiwar students were gunned down at Kent

State in 1970, and workers faced escalating economic attacks, including Nixon’s effort to impose wage controls.

The upsurge in the 1970s exposed the character of the trade union bureaucracy. Its entire outlook, which expressed its parasitic social interests, was defined by its support for American capitalism and imperialism, its alliance with the Democratic Party, and its fierce anticommunism. By the end of the decade, the union apparatus began openly integrating itself with management and embraced its role as enforcers of mass layoffs and wage cuts.

The continued sacrifice of workers’ lives for profits shows the urgent need for the building of a rank-and-file movement to enforce workers’ control over safety. This can be achieved only through a frontal assault on the “rights” of the capitalist owners, including the expropriation of industry and its re-organization under the democratic control of the working class.

This fight is being taken up today by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which has launched an investigation into Adams’ death to throw open the lid on the daily workplace massacre and to prepare a fight for workers’ power on the shop floor.

Death of a steelworker

By David North

“Why do you want to leave now?” Martha remembers asking him. “It doesn’t take you more than 30 minutes to get there and you don’t start work until 3 p.m.”

But Rick did not want to take any chances being late because in Lorain, Ohio it is not easy for a young worker to come by a steady job. During the past year, he had been laid off a number of times; and now that he, his wife Martha, and their one-year-old daughter Laurie had moved into a new apartment, Rick wanted to make sure he kept the job in the mill.

Martha kidded her husband a bit about his punctuality, finally persuading him to stay home a few minutes longer. But at 2:15 p.m. Rick kissed her goodbye and left for the plant. Martha never saw him alive again.

That evening, shortly after 10, less than an hour before the end of the shift, 20-year-old Rick Hertzig was killed in the plant. US Steel and the Local 1104 bureaucrats of the United Steel Workers of America call it an accident.

But Marty Trelka, Rick’s uncle, who has worked in the National Tube plant for 24 years, describes what happened differently:

“The union paper says it was an accident ‘pure and simple.’ They’ll never be able to have me believe that. I say Rick was like a lamb led to slaughter.”

Rick did not die in an accident. He was murdered by US Steel in the course of its ruthless drive for profits. Without the slightest interest in the life of this young worker, the plant management had Rick—on the job for only five days—working on the wrong shift in one of the most dangerous parts of the mill without any proper training and under conditions that were a mockery of even the most deplorable safety standards.

When he arrived in the plant that afternoon, Rick was assigned to the coke mill. It is assumed that a new worker is to be broken in by the foreman or an extremely experienced worker. But Rick was placed with a worker not much older than himself. Because the heating equipment is completely inadequate, clouds of steam accumulated in the area of the quenching car where Rick was working.

Through this area runs what is called the door machine. Steel workers must manoeuvre carefully to avoid this powerful vehicle which moves along a track while opening different furnaces. But on the evening of Rick's death, the entire track was enveloped in steam.

The worker who was breaking Rick into the job suggested a coffee break and moved toward the locker room. Rick tried to follow him. But because the fog from the steam was so thick that he could not see more than six inches ahead of himself, Rick lost sight of his co-worker. Not knowing the layout of the plant, he moved across the track.

Grady Donaldson was operating the machine door. "I couldn't see a thing that evening," he told the Bulletin. "When there's steam building up, it's impossible to see anything."

Within seconds Rick was dead. The machine door hurtled over Rick and crushed him. In his brief report, the coroner listed the time of death as 10:05 p.m.

The company kept the plant operating, and sent a guard to inform Joe and Bertha Hertzog that their son had just been killed.

"They came from the plant around a quarter to twelve," Bertha recalls. "Rick's father had gone up to bed and I was sitting here crocheting and watching television when I heard someone knocking on the door. I thought to myself 'Who the heck is coming at this time?'"

"I was a bit afraid to open the door, but I put the light on and noticed that the guy had some kind of badge on. I opened the door and he said, 'Is your husband home?' I told him that Joe was in bed but they wanted to talk to him. So I called up to my husband and he came down.

"When Joe came down, the guard checked whether we had a son named Richard. When he said 'yes,' the guard replied 'Your son has had an accident.' Well, I immediately thought that maybe he'd had an automobile accident because Rick should have been home long before.

"My husband asked if Rick was badly hurt. When the guard said 'fatal,' that was it. I don't know what happened after that because I know that I sat in that chair and I was screaming. Then the guard left and Martha came over. That's it. I don't know anything else."

Immediately, US Steel moved to prevent any investigation of the circumstances surrounding Rick's death. Just in case his family was planning a lawsuit, the company acted to isolate them from possible witnesses. They were told that it would not be possible to arrange a meeting with Roger Rhône, who had been working with Rick just before the accident, because he is too distraught emotionally.

"Everything is being hushed up," says Marty Trelka. "I demanded a coroner's inquest but it was denied on the grounds that there has to be a crime involved in the accident. So I asked them what they would call what happened to Rick."

Nor is it easy to find people who are anxious to talk about Rick's death.

"I knew Rick though he never came in here," admits Millie, who works in a tavern across the street from the mill. "He was a fine boy. Now that he's dead, the company is blaming the whole thing on him. But I'm not going to say anything more about it because I want to stay here."

From the one place where Marty and the Hertzog family expected strong support—Local 1104—none is forthcoming. The leadership, closely tied to

Steel Workers President I.W. Abel, is just as anxious as the company to bury the case. The local bureaucracy stands completely behind Abel's reactionary collaboration with US Steel's productivity drive.

Just three weeks before Rick was killed, the president of the local, George Pashkevich, flew down to Washington, D.C. to participate with Abel in the joint "labor-management" conference on productivity. It was at this meeting that Abel scolded the ranks for not producing more profits.

The Lorain Labor Leader, newspaper of Local 1104, barely mentioned the death of Rick. It carried the report in the sixth paragraph of an article entitled "Steelworkers 'Question' Plant's Safety Program." The paragraph whitewashed the company:

"Hall (the Safety Committee Chairman) indicated that the unfortunate death of the young worker in the coke plant a few days ago was still under investigation, but admitted that exhaustive investigation and information gathered so far pointed to the death as being 'accidental, pure and simple.'"

Marty was stunned when he saw the union paper calling his nephew's death a "pure and simple" accident. When he demanded an explanation from the union officers, Pashkevich claimed that he had not seen the article before it was published.

Marty does not accept the explanation. "I don't expect anything from the company, but when the union takes the side of management—that really hits home. Pashkevich told me not to speak to you because you're a communist. So I said to him: 'What's wrong with that. What have you done about Rick?'"

Older workers in the plant recalled similar "accidents" and are bitter about the refusal of the bureaucracy to fight for better conditions. One worker in his 50s told the Bulletin: "Like all steel plants, nothing is said about conditions until something happens. But we can't bring the boy back. A lot of this has to do with the union which is run by men who sit on their behinds all day. After a while, I stopped paying attention to union meetings and the rest.

"Once I went to a meeting to ask about conditions in the plant because Abel was there. But when I raised my point, Abel just got up and said: 'You're out of order.' That's why I don't go to meetings. They don't listen to the men."

When one visits the mammoth Lorain Works, in which US Steel produces a great part of its pipe products, it is possible to obtain a brochure in which the following is written:

"Safety is the most important aspect of steelmaking as around-the-clock emphasis is placed on mill safety precautions. It is more than hearsay when steel men remark that they are safer on the job than at home. Lorain Works' excellent safety record in recent years confirms this statement."

No one in Lorain has ever heard a worker from the plant say anything of the sort. "Conditions which we have to work under in the plant are pitiful," declared Joe Modock, Rick's closest friend. He has been in the plant for six years.

"Where I work, in the blooming mill, it's just dirty. There's no regard for safety. Once I complained about running a crane because the lighting wasn't proper. The foreman said he'd send me home if I didn't start running the crane. Men could have been badly hurt if the crane hit them. But the foreman only said that lights are being ordered, and I told him 'Sure, for the last year.'"

Shaking his head, Marty told the Bulletin: "I don't know how they can boast about safety conditions in the coke plant. Management is responsible for Rick's death. They don't even know who was on duty when he was killed. First of all, I don't think Rick was even instructed in all the safety rules. Then they had him walking around where he couldn't see.

"Now, the company is saying that there's hardly ever any steam in that area. Hell, it's full of steam three out of five days.

"Another thing is the fact they had him on the wrong shift. He was

supposed to be working from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. When I asked the management why Rick was put on the late shift prematurely, they said they did it because Rick was so ‘advanced.’ As if I didn’t know they’re just trying to butter us up to explain their mistake away.”

In addition to covering up the real conditions in the plant that caused Rick’s death, his wife Martha revealed that: “Now they’re spreading rumors that Rick was tired when he came to work, but that’s not true. When he went to work he was fine. Sure, we had moved some furniture earlier in the day, but Rick was very strong. In fact I had to fight him from going to work too early.”

When Rick had been able to start work in the plant, months after submitting his application, the entire family was jubilant. “When Rick would be laid off, he was really depressed,” his mother said. “But when he had a job, he was wonderful. He wanted to work in National Tube for security. We thought that working with a big company, and it’s about the biggest here, is more reliable than these small firms. The only thing Rick had against National Tube was that they paid only every two weeks. But I told him that he would have to budget himself to make the money last.”

Martha felt just as happy: “Finally, we had a job and an apartment. It seemed that everything was going good. Then this happened.”

For months, Rick’s father, Joe, had tried to get him a job in the auto plant where he has worked since the 1940s. But the plant was not taking men on. “It’s really a shame,” he says now. “Rick knew everything there was to know about cars. When I brought a new car home, it didn’t leave the garage again until Rick had taken it apart and put it back together again. But I couldn’t get him into my plant no matter who I spoke to.”

The family was especially pleased when Rick first went to work in National Tube last January 2 because he had fought for nearly one year to get the job. Martha described the arrogance with which US Steel had treated Rick after he submitted his application.

“He nearly did not get the job. Rick first put in his application in May, but they weren’t calling anyone then. So he tried keeping a job in other places but was laid off—actually he quit one of the jobs because he was only earning \$1.65 an hour. Rick wrote out another application in August, and then he heard from his uncle Marty that the company had taken on men who had signed up later.

“So Rick went down to the mill to find out what was going on. He spoke to this company man who was very snotty to Rick, saying that my husband hadn’t filled out his application. Then the guy got the record book and just slung it at Rick. Well, Rick was kind of mad but still held on to his patience. He just looked through the book and sure enough found his application.

“The company man didn’t know what to say. But then he looked up and said: ‘I know why we didn’t hire you. Your application was messy. Your penmanship is no good.’

“Rick filled out the application again and handed it to a secretary. She picked up another application belonging to this man who had all sorts of references, and she asked Rick: ‘Who would you hire?’ Rick told her that it wasn’t his fault that he didn’t have a lot of job experience. Finally, Rick got the job. He took his physical and passed it. Then he went to an orientation session, and then they told him he could start work January 2.

“He started that Tuesday and worked odd jobs until Friday. Rick had a day off Saturday, and then he went back to work Sunday on the late shift for the first time. He didn’t tell me what he was going to do in the mill.”

Rick was killed that night, crushed by the machine door that he had not been able to see because of the blinding steam.

“Do you know what this so-called ‘accident’ means,” asks Marty. “US Steel took away 45 years of work from Rick, of love for his family, of life.”

“And maybe they took away Laurie’s mother,” adds Martha, “because I might have to work all day now to support her. Rick’s death means that I’m a 20-year-old widow with a child who has a club foot and needs a lot

of attention, maybe even an operation.”

Under Ohio state law, the company does not owe Martha one penny. US Steel does not even have to pay her Rick’s paycheck for the only week he worked because she is not yet 21.

“I don’t know how long it will be until I begin to come back to myself,” says Rick’s mother, whose eyes are red from crying.

“This afternoon before you came I had another crying jag. My neighbor came over and helped me to stop. But losing someone you’ve raised and known for 20 years really goes deep.”

Nothing has changed in the National Tube plant since the death of Rick Hertzig. Two weeks after US Steel murdered Rick, another young worker nearly lost his leg in the plant. On the day the *Bulletin* spoke to men outside the plant, the ambulance passed through the gates twice. And every day, the ranks face the danger of lead poisoning.

But conditions in National Tube are not unique. Two weeks ago, William J. Lindley was crushed to death in the Fontana plant of Kaiser Steel—a victim of the determination of the steel bosses to reap their profit even if they have to kill workers to do it. And these crimes, allowed by a union bureaucracy which protects its privileges by supporting the bosses, are the results of what the press calls “pioneering efforts in productivity.”

In the plants of every industry in the country, the conditions which led to the death of Rick Hertzig are being reproduced. It is through merciless speedup and a complete disregard for the lives of the ranks that big business—goaded on by Nixon—intends to solve its economic crisis. It is only through the building of a socialist leadership in the trade unions that fights for the nationalization of industry under workers’ control that it will be possible to put a stop to the crimes of which Rick Hertzig was only one victim.



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