

The Clairton Coke Works disaster: Social murder in Pennsylvania

Tom Mackaman**13 August 2025**

The massive explosion at the US Steel Clairton Coke Works outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on Monday has now killed two workers and injured at least ten others, five of them critically.

Timothy Quinn, 39, a father of three from South Huntingdon, was killed in the blast. Beloved by family and coworkers, Quinn was remembered by one colleague as “one of the best guys I’ve ever worked with,” someone who “would give you his shirt off his back if you needed anything. He loved his family. He talked about his kids all the time.”

The identity of the second worker killed has not yet been released pending family notification. Five of the injured remain hospitalized in critical but stable condition.

Rescue crews from 34 fire and EMT units braved unstable structures and lingering gas hazards to search for survivors. Two medics were briefly hospitalized during these heroic efforts, which saved the lives of injured workers.

A series of three massive explosions began just before 11:00 a.m. on Monday at the Clairton plant, the largest coking facility in North America with a workforce of 1,400, located just 20 miles from Pittsburgh. The blasts ripped through coke oven batteries 13 and 14, shaking structures across the sprawling, nearly 400-acre industrial complex and rattling surrounding neighborhoods with shockwaves.

The explosion sent a towering column of thick, black smoke into the sky, visible for miles from the plant. The facility is part of US Steel’s Mon Valley Works, alongside the Edgar Thomson plant in Braddock and the Irvin plant in West Mifflin.

In a testament to corporate greed and indifference, operations at Clairton continued today without even a pause to allow coworkers of the deceased to grieve. Only coke oven batteries 13 and 14, where the explosion occurred, remain offline. US Steel executives confirmed at a press conference that while the affected batteries are shut down for investigation and safety checks, it is business as usual at the rest of the facility.

No official cause for the disaster has yet been confirmed, but evidence points to a possible gas pressure buildup in the aging infrastructure, which has long been criticized for inadequate maintenance.

Workers knew the plant they reported to each day was in a

dangerous state of disrepair. The facility has a long history of serious incidents, including deadly explosions in 2009 and 2010, both traced to gas leaks in coke battery pipelines and linked to equipment failures. A maintenance worker was killed in the 2009 blast, while the 2010 explosion injured 14 employees and six contractors. Most recently, on February 5 of this year, another explosion at the plant injured two workers.

Allegheny County Health Department records show that Clairton Coke Works reported 167 “uncontrolled pushes” in 2024—incidents in which pollution controls failed during the removal of coke from the ovens, sending untreated emissions into the air. The violations, which occurred at multiple batteries, including 13 and 14, led to a \$918,000 fine for US Steel, following a \$4.6 million penalty in 2022 for more than 800 similar incidents. These levies amount to little more than a slap on the wrist, a minor rounding error in the company’s operating costs.

Repeated warnings were ignored by US Steel, now a subsidiary of Nippon Steel following a \$15 billion deal brokered by Donald Trump that effectively places the White House in control of America’s largest steelmaker. The agreement hinges on a National Security provision granting the US “golden shares” with veto power over key strategic decisions.

It is a marriage pact between the authoritarian state and corporate monopoly, in which deregulation, profit and war preparation advance hand in hand. Politicians from both capitalist parties vow to slash “job-killing regulations” in the name of fueling military production. In practice, this means boosting corporate earnings while dismantling the hard-won protections secured by past generations of workers.

Workplace health and safety has been under relentless attack since the late 1970s under both Democratic and Republican administrations. By 2022, one study found, it would take the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) 186 years to inspect every workplace in America.

Under Trump, the assault has reached a qualitatively new level. On the campaign trail he vowed that from “Day One” he would “immediately remove every single burdensome regulation,” including the very rules meant to prevent workers from being killed, maimed and poisoned.

The Trump administration's plan for social counter-revolution slashes OSHA's budget by 8 percent and cuts more than 200 inspector positions, ensuring fewer on-site safety checks at plants like Clairton. At the same time, the White House is pushing the steepest reduction for the Environmental Protection Agency in decades—up to 50 percent in one proposal—while eliminating all funding for the US Chemical Safety Board. The Mine Safety and Health Administration faces a proposed 10 percent budget cut.

These attacks on workplace safety unmask America's dirtiest secret: That the ruthless drive for profit and the push toward war are actually two sides of the same coin. The budget savings from the cuts—about \$5 billion—is a pittance compared to the \$6.2 trillion in wealth held by America's billionaires. And the richest 1 percent are now set to reap \$117 billion in tax breaks in 2026 alone under Trump's "megabill," with a projected windfall of \$1.02 trillion over the next decade.

Meanwhile, the *total* budget remaining that is allocated to major federal workplace and environmental regulatory agencies is approximately \$12 billion. This is a mere one one-hundredth of the military budget, less than the cost of a single aircraft carrier, and less than the "special" extra funding handed over to Israel for its genocidal war against Gaza in the last year of the Biden administration.

Every day across the United States, workers die on the job—often reduced to a few lines in local papers, if reported at all. Recent tragedies include:

- **Ronald Adams Sr.** (63), a Stellantis autoworker in Southeastern Michigan, crushed by a gantry crane on April 7;
- **Michael Dewaine Townsend** (39), a steelworker killed on June 5 in Fairfield, Alabama, after a railcar he was riding struck another railcar;
- **Ryan Starnes** (23), a construction worker killed on July 5 in Michigan when struck by an excavator bucket;
- **Ronald Baquera Jr.** (44), buried alive in a trench collapse in Goodyear, Arizona, on July 8;
- **Brayan Neftali Otoniel Canu Joj** (19), a Guatemalan immigrant killed on July 15 at Tina's Burritos in Vernon, California, after being sucked into a meat grinder while cleaning it;
- **Tuah Kollie** (42), killed on July 24 in an industrial accident at a steel plant in Fargo, North Dakota;
- **Kim Jung Won** (34), a South Korean contractor crushed to death on July 27 at LG Energy Solutions in Holland, Michigan, when a machine—supposedly disabled for maintenance—pinned him between its frame and lifting mechanism; and
- **Dylan D. Danielson** (32) and his two young children were killed on July 30 in a massive explosion at Horizon Biofuels in Fremont, Nebraska.

The union apparatus is doing nothing to stop the ongoing wave of workplace deaths, including that of Timothy Quinn.

The United Steelworkers (USW), whose members work at Clairton and other US steel plants, has not merely stood by as

health and safety protections are gutted, it has functioned as an active partner of corporate management, subordinating workers' lives to industry profitability. The last thing the USW bureaucracy wants is any movement among workers that threatens the national security pact between the industry and the Trump administration, which it hopes will provide new streams of revenue and "seats at the table" in the councils of war.

A Clairton resident, Amy Sowers, responded to Quinn's death by asking, "How many more lives are going to have to be lost until something happens?" The answer is that nothing will happen unless and until workers take matters into their own hands.

The unending wave of industrial slaughter and the sacrifice of lives for profit must end. "Workers' lives matter!" must become a guiding principle for action. Last month, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) convened a meeting of the workers' inquiry into the death of Ronald Adams Sr. at the Stellantis auto plant outside Detroit.

The hearing, based on detailed testimony from Adams' coworkers, exposed persistent safety hazards, management's disregard for repeated warnings, and the United Auto Workers bureaucracy's refusal to enforce even the most basic protections. It concluded that Adams' death was not an unforeseeable "accident," but the inevitable outcome of a system in which workers' health and lives are treated as expendable.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the IWA-RFC insist that only the independent initiative of the working class—through the formation of rank-and-file committees, democratic bodies led by workers themselves—can secure safe conditions, defend lives and uphold human dignity on the job. These committees unite workers across industries and borders, breaking free from the grip of the pro-corporate union apparatus, and linking the fight for safety to the struggle to replace a system that subordinates human life to private profit.

We urge all workers to join this investigation into workplace deaths and come forward with any information by filling out the form below.



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