

“This could have been prevented”: Clairton steelworkers speak out after deadly plant explosion

Samuel Davidson
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Do you work at Clairton Coke Works or another steel mill? Send a report on conditions at the plant by filling out the form at the end of this article. Submissions will be kept anonymous.

“This could have been prevented,” said steelworkers leaving their shift at US Steel’s Clairton Coke Works, describing the Monday morning explosion that killed two co-workers and injured 10 others.

Pointing to the *World Socialist Web Site* statement titled “The Clairton Coke Works disaster: Social murder in Pennsylvania,” one worker said, “I think that’s exactly right. We would report problems over and over again, and they just kept putting it off, putting it off, putting it off.” The WSWS is not publishing the names of workers to protect them from company retaliation.

Several workers spoke with WSWS reporters as they entered and left the mill, all confirming that the facility is aging and in disrepair, and that management routinely refuses to fix broken equipment or carries out repairs without taking proper safety precautions.

The worker said management’s response was always the same: they would promise to address problems “during a big project” or claim they would “take care of it” during an outage. “Well, they didn’t,” the worker said. “And this is what happens.”

The explosion at batteries 13 and 14 took place a little before 11 a.m. Monday. Timothy Quinn, 39, of South Huntingdon, and Steven Menefee, 52, of Tarrs in Westmoreland County, were killed in the blast. Menefee’s name was released yesterday. He was pronounced dead at 7:26 p.m. at the scene, according to the Allegheny County Medical Examiner’s Office.

Ten other workers were hospitalized. As of this writing, three remain in the hospital—one with severe burns, another who has undergone multiple amputations, and one who is in a medically induced coma.

In a display of corporate greed and indifference, operations at Clairton continued without pause to allow coworkers of the deceased to grieve. Even those working on batteries 13 and 14, where the explosion occurred, were forced to remain on the job in other areas of the plant.

Coke is produced by baking coal in specially designed ovens, where it is heated to over 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit in an oxygen-free environment to prevent combustion. During this process, the coal releases gases and vapors, including coke oven gas, tar,

ammonia and benzene.

When operating properly, the gases, tar, ammonia and benzene are captured and further refined for sale. A portion of the coke oven gas is routed back into the ovens and used to maintain the high baking temperatures.

Another worker told the WSWS it was his understanding that the explosion was caused by a leaking valve on the pipes that return coke oven gas back into the ovens, but that the company had delayed making the repair.

The valve had been “leaking two weeks, maybe a month,” the worker said. “I understand they were told to exercise the valve”—forcing it open and closed to try to clear any blockage. It was during this process that the explosion occurred.

The worker added that the company should have shut down the battery and purged the lines of gases before attempting the repair to ensure it was done safely.

“What they should have done is isolate the entire section of pipe, pump nitrogen into it to push out the gases, and replace the broken valve. That valve had been leaking for at least two weeks, maybe even 30 days, but [the company] didn’t want to shut it down for 12 or 15 hours to do a proper purge,” the worker said.

The worker added that he did not know the exact figure but estimated it would have cost only about five to ten thousand dollars to purge the pipes. “We’re talking thousands not millions to do it the right way. And two people’s lives would have been saved and the others who have been injured.

“At any level, it doesn’t make sense,” he added. “Sometimes I think that you couldn’t do such ridiculous things if you were trying.”

The company’s decision to delay maintenance and attempt repairs without taking the time and expense to make the equipment safe mirrors the circumstances of Ronald Adams Sr.’s death on April 7 of this year. Adams, a 63-year-old machine repairman at the Stellantis Dundee Engine Plant, was crushed to death when the machine he was working on unexpectedly engaged.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees have launched an independent workers’ investigation into his death, which found that the company routinely failed to properly disengage and tag out machines before performing maintenance.

Nor were the failures at Clairton limited to batteries 13 and 14,

and this was not the first explosion at the mill.

“We’ve had five explosions since I worked here,” another worker said. “We had a control room explosion, a B battery explosion, another B battery explosion, the big fire, and now this explosion on 13 and 14 battery. The stack blew up just this past February, six or seven months ago.”

Pointing out that safety problems exist throughout the mill, the worker said, “It’s a totally different battery. We’ve had two explosions on B battery.”

The explosions, the worker added, keep happening. “I don’t know what’s going on here. We weren’t having these kinds of explosions in this plant before. Now it’s almost becoming normal.”

Many workers confirmed ongoing problems on the B battery. “When I heard on the news about the explosion,” said a worker who wasn’t on shift at the time, “I thought it was the B battery. It is so bad.”

“B battery is pretty much rigged together,” said another worker. “Things fall apart, and they refuse to go out and fix them.”

In September 2009, an explosion killed 32-year-old maintenance worker Nick Revetta. In July 2010, another blast injured 14 employees and six contractors. Just this past February, yet another explosion injured two workers.

Referring to these earlier incidents, one worker expressed frustration that the company never took the batteries offline one at a time to perform the necessary maintenance.

“After the first explosion, and certainly after the second, if they had wanted to fix things properly, they could have said, ‘Okay, we’ve got to idle battery one and get everything fixed.’ We could have moved on, repairing one unit at a time. This could have all been prevented.

“This could have been prevented,” the worker repeated. “We were supposed to put \$3 billion into this before COVID hit. We were supposed to get new pipes that would help with the gas and other issues.”

Soon after announcing the plans, US Steel scaled the project back to \$1 billion and then cancelled it altogether.

The worker also believes the company is seeking a cover-up. “They don’t want to pay the families. Nick Revetta’s brother Pat was working here. They didn’t want to pay them for years.

“They are going to try to cover up what happened here, so it will take years. They already have us doing work to hide this. Now they want us in there doing the cleanup work, even while OSHA is conducting an investigation.”

“We just lost one of our brothers. It’s like they want a scapegoat for this.”

In the United States, there were 5,283 fatal work injuries recorded in 2023 and 5,486 in 2022. This amounts to a worker dying every 99 minutes from a work-related injury.

The union apparatus is doing nothing to stop the ongoing wave of safety violations that are killing workers.

The United Steelworkers (USW), whose members work at Clairton, issued only a perfunctory statement that they “will work with the appropriate authorities to ensure a thorough investigation and to see that our members get the support they need.”

In reality, the USW is complicit in the unsafe conditions,

working to block any genuine struggle by steelworkers at the Clairton plant and across the country against the long-standing pattern of hazardous working conditions.

Just over two months ago, with much fanfare, President Trump announced the takeover of US Steel by Nippon Steel and the granting of a White House “golden share” in the company. This move is part of the administration’s broader reorganization of industrial production in preparation for war.

As the WSWs explained in its August 13 statement, the United Steelworkers (USW) has not merely stood by as health and safety protections are dismantled, but has acted as a partner of corporate management, subordinating workers’ lives to the demands of profitability. The bureaucracy’s overriding concern is to protect its alliance with the steel industry and the Trump administration’s “national security” pact, which promises the union new revenue streams and positions in the councils of war.

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.

The explosion at Clairton is a warning and a call to action for workers everywhere to take this fight into their own hands. Workers’ lives matter, and this truth must become the rallying cry for a unified struggle against unsafe conditions and the system that produces them.

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