

Corporate whitewash underway: US Steel calls actions leading to deadly explosion at Clairton facility “planned maintenance”

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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 below. Submissions will be kept anonymous.

In a statement issued Friday, US Steel is seeking to deflect blame for last Monday's explosion which killed two workers and seriously injured ten others.

The two workers killed in the blast were 39-year-old Timothy Quinn and 52-year-old Steven Menefee. Ten other workers had to be taken to local hospitals. Three remain hospitalized with severe burns, and one worker has had multiple amputations.

The blast was so powerful that it was heard for miles. It shook the ground, broke windows and sent a cloud of smoke and ash hundreds of feet into the air. Menefee was buried in debris and his body was not found until 7:30 pm that evening.

The blast was completely preventable, had proper upgrades and maintenance been performed in the aging facility. Instead, the company repeatedly put off needed repairs to meet production goals.

In a statement Friday, a spokesperson for US Steel downplayed the company's responsibility, calling the explosion unforeseeable, and that it happened during what they called a routine “planned maintenance.”

Preliminary indications lead us to believe that the explosion happened when a gas valve was flushed in preparation for planned maintenance. As pressure built inside the valve, it failed, and coke oven gas filled the area. The explosion then happened when an ignition source was found.

Nothing about the problem should have been treated as routine. Workers at the mill report that the valve had been leaking for two to four weeks, and that the company did not take action to fix it.

US Steel's statement does not explain why—knowing they had a malfunctioning valve—they would have added pressure to it, instead of first reducing the pressure in the pipes by halting the production of coke in the ovens.

“The bottom line is management knew about this weeks to a month that there was a problem,” a worker told the WSWS. “It

should have been done back in July, not August. Like we said, when it comes down to maintenance they put a band-aid on it and keep pushing coke.”

Monday's explosion took place in the reversal or control room of the 13 and 14 batteries. Here hot gases given off by the coke ovens are directed back and used as fuel to heat the ovens. Every twenty or thirty minutes, the gases need to be reversed in order to heat the coke evenly.

The equipment used at the Clairton mill is out of date and aging. The piping and controls have undergone years of heating and cooling cycles, leading to metal fatigue.

According to a post by John Groves to Steel Mill Pictorial, batteries 13, 14 and 15 (the site of Monday's explosion) were originally built in 1924. Each battery has 61 ovens, for a total of 183. All units underwent complete reconstruction in 1953 and again in 1979. However, batteries 13 and 14 were not reactivated until a decade later, meaning the current batteries are 45 years old.

“They just would keep rigging things together, not fixing stuff. The batteries need to be taken down one at a time and completely repaired,” said the steelworker. “They just didn't want to spend the money.”

Another worker wrote and told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “I witness the higher management aggressively speaking to lower management when a break down happens, and then that trickles down to the union employee, where the correct way of doing things gets rushed.

“The workplace culture is horrible, they claim they care but they don't. [They are] reactive to everything, just like this explosion. Afterwards, they force maintenance on six 12-hour days to just be there just in case the operating batteries break down [so] they can get back online as soon as possible.”

The worker pointed out that a former production boss was made the maintenance boss. “He definitely is biased to production first,” the worker wrote.

“They don't want to deal with the employees who struggle with electrical side of things.”

Overall, the worker said that the company is “more worried about paperwork than the actual job itself.”

A retired steelworker expressed the focus of the company when he said, “They just move the bodies and keep pushing coke.”

The company says that the investigation will take months if not

years. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has not issued a report and says that its initial report can take up to six months.

The US Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB) is sending a team to investigate. They say their report will take 18 months to two years to complete.

Even when its report is completed, the CSB has no regulatory authority and cannot issue fines. They are limited to only making recommendations.

In 2017, an explosion at the Didion Milling Fails plant in Cambria, Wisconsin left five workers dead. The CSB final report was not issued until December 2023. More than one and a half years since then, the company has yet to implement any of the nine safety recommendations made in the report.

These company and government investigations lead to nothing and are conducted only to whitewash the company's real responsibility and hope that it will fade from workers' memory.

The human cost of cost-cutting

Killed in last week's blast were 39-year-old Timothy Quinn and 52-year-old Steven Menefee.

Quinn leaves behind his three children—Jeremiah, Lilliana and Teagan, as well as his mother, Debra Quinn, for whom he was caring, his siblings and his longtime girlfriend, Lucinda Dodds.

Menefee, was a devoted husband to Danielle and father to two daughters, Eliana and Ariella.

Funeral services were held for Quinn on Saturday. Hundreds of family, friends, community members and co-workers attended the funeral and the two viewings that were held on Friday. The large turnout was a reflection of the deep sense of loss felt not only by Quinn's family and friends but by his coworkers and the broader working class community in the Mon Valley of Pennsylvania.

Visitation services for Menefee will be held Monday and Tuesday, followed by his funeral and hundreds of people are expected to attend those services as well.

The United Steelworkers, which covers the workers at the Clairton mill have remained almost completely silent.

Since the explosion one week ago, they have only issued one statement posted on their website the day of the explosion, giving a bland statement of sympathy while pledging to work with OSHA in its investigation.

The USW has occupational health and safety experts and other representatives on the ground at the Clairton Works assessing the situation and aiding our members. While we are still determining the scope of the tragedy, we are aware that multiple workers are receiving medical treatment for their injuries. In the coming days, we will work with the appropriate authorities to ensure a thorough investigation and to see that our members get the support they need.

The USW bureaucrats will help the company and the government sweep this incident under the rug, screening their actions with phrases about how 'brave' steelworkers are for risking their lives for the 'good of the country and their families.' In other words, the bureaucrats accept a state of affairs where workers have to risk their lives every day by going to work.

While the USW posts next to nothing about the explosion, workers at Clairton received dozens, if not hundreds, of union text messages over the past two years opposing the Nippon buyout of US Steel on "America First" grounds. By promoting nationalism, chauvinism and anti-socialism the United Steelworkers seeks to divide the working class and divert anger away from the company.

During that time, how many text messages did workers receive warning about the unsafe working conditions at Clairton or the other US Steel mills, or proposing industrial action to force the company to correct them?

For decades, the USW bureaucracy has functioned as a second layer of management, overseeing the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs, forcing through contracts with massive concessions, and working to suppress workers' struggles even as the company piles up one safety violation after another.

The lives lost and the families shattered must not be swept under the rug through endless investigations and token fines! To uncover the truth and hold those responsible to account, workers themselves must take the initiative.

An independent rank-and-file investigation into the Clairton disaster, led by steelworkers and supported by workers throughout the region, is necessary. Only such a workers' inquiry can expose the full extent of management's negligence and the complicity of the union apparatus, and lay the basis for a genuine fight for safe workplaces and the protection of workers' lives.

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