

“It is time for us to build towards a general strike”: Letter from former steel worker on the Clairton Coke Works explosion

An ex-steelworker
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The following letter was submitted to the WSWS in response to the August 11 explosion which occurred at the Clairton Coke Works facility near Pittsburgh. Two steel workers, 39-year-old Timothy Quinn and 52-year-old Steven Menefee, were killed and 10 injured.

To send your own statements, fill out the form below. They will be published anonymously unless requested otherwise.

To the workers and families at the Clairton Coke Works:

I am a former steelworker from Baltimore. I am writing to offer my condolences to the families of Brothers Quinn and Menefee as well as hope for full recoveries for the workers injured in the Clairton Works disaster.

I worked at the Bethlehem Steel Sparrows Point facility in Baltimore over 20 years ago before they went bankrupt. I left when they declared bankruptcy, which was the “writing was on the wall.” I was a fourth-generation steelworker, and I’m sure many of you come from mill families.

Bethlehem paid over \$600 million to buy Lukens plate mills near Philadelphia in the late 90s, they also spent \$300 million to build a modern cold roll mill at Sparrows Point around this same time. The building of the cold sheet mill could be justified, however the purchase of Lukens was foolish.

Sparrows Point had a money-making plate mill already in operation. The purchase of Lukens was only to eliminate a competitor and capture their customer base. The company became mired in debt and eventually folded when steel prices collapsed. Bush administration tariffs did not save Bethlehem Steel.

I mention this history only because of its similarities

with US Steel. US Steel spent a large sum buying the Big River electric arc furnace facility in Arkansas. They were following the blueprint of Nucor, electric arc furnaces in lower wage non-unionized southern states.

Of course these debts taken on by US Steel to fund this purchase cannot harm profits, capitalism would not allow it. Cost cutting at the expense of safety, wages, and benefits will pay this bill—hence the lack of investment in the Mon Valley facilities. The explosion at Clairton was a payment in worker’s blood.

Enter Nippon Steel, a large multinational corporation with facilities throughout the world. These companies purchase their competitors and run their facilities into the ground, squeezing every drop of profit from them, and when they can no longer be band-aided together, sell them off for scrap. Their attitude is: damn the workers and communities supported by the mills!

The merger between US Steel and Nippon steel was opposed by the United Steelworkers officials, who claim that workers can protect their jobs by keeping steel “American-made.” But one company is not better than another, this is a feature of the capitalist system. Workers and their communities are commodities no different than the coke, lime, and ore pellets fed into the furnaces. The profits extracted from our labor is all that matters to the capitalist.

This identical situation exists across all industries, across all countries, all owned by the same big banks and multinational corporations.

The USW officials will not fight the capitalists. Just as they have spent decades giving up one concession after the other to US Steel in the name of “competitiveness,” they will offer concessionary deals

to Nippon while telling workers these deals are necessary to keep the mills open.

Worker's struggle cannot be limited to the trade union officials or the confines of one country. Just as the capitalists operate across industries and borders, so must American steelworkers unite with workers of other industries and workers across the world.

We make the profits, we demand our share of the profits. It is time for us to build towards a general strike. Workers must build socialist consciousness and understand that our politics are socialism, the reorganization of society for the benefit of workers, not the parasitic oligarchs.

With worker solidarity,

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