

Clairton workers expose conditions behind fatal blast as USW officials defend US Steel

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 below. Submissions will be kept anonymous.

Steelworkers continue to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* to expose the unsafe conditions that led to the August 11 explosion at US Steel Clairton Coke Works, which killed two workers and seriously injured 10 others.

Their statements underscore the need for an independent workers investigation into the disaster to prevent US Steel, the United Steelworkers and state officials from covering up the real causes of this disaster. To protect workers from retaliation by company and USW officials, the *World Socialist Web Site* is not revealing the identity of the workers speaking out.

“I have been to many other large industrial facilities, and nothing comes close to the run-down state of Clairton coke works,” a worker with several years at the mill told the WSWS. “The plant is in need of serious repair. Every battery with the exception of “C” battery, consists of old, rusted, and outdated technology. I don’t want to work there. I’m hoping to find another job, but for now I have to and don’t want to get fired,” the worker explained.

Several workers have already confirmed that a broken valve in the reversal or control room for the 13 and 14 batteries led to the August 11 explosion. Workers report that the batteries were in disrepair and that the valve had been leaking for two to four weeks but the company refused to take the steps to repair it safely.

Killed in the August 11 explosion were 39-year-old Timothy Quinn and 52-year-old Steven Menefee. Ten other workers were seriously injured and taken to local hospitals. Three remain hospitalized with severe burns, and one worker has had multiple amputations. Neither the hospital, US Steel or the United Steelworkers have released an update on their condition.

Workers at the mill are now being forced to work 12-hour days, six days a week, repairing the damaged mill. While cooler weather is expected this week, in the two weeks since the explosion, daytime highs reached the low 90s with

temperatures in the steelworks much hotter.

Workers are being told that if the repairs are not made fast enough the 13 and 14 batteries will not be restarted. The implicit threat, enforced by the USW, is that workers must take additional risks if they want to keep their jobs.

“My husband works at Clairton coke works. They are forcing all employees no matter what department they are in to work 12 hour shifts, 6 days a week,” the wife of a steelworker told the WSWS. Concerned that additional disasters are in the making, she wrote: “These employees are exhausted (and) overworked.”

US Steel, in a grotesque display of corporate greed and indifference, refused to allow coworkers of the deceased and injured to grieve following the explosion and were forced to remain on the job. “There’s no appreciation or mourning for those lost or injured on the explosion,” she wrote.

In statements last Friday to CBS Pittsburgh affiliate KDKA News, Richard Tikey, the vice president of USW Local 1557, denied that the explosion had been caused by antiquated equipment and rejected his own members’ statements that US Steel had been warned about gas leaks at least a month before the fatal blast.

“Tikey said there was a leak in the area of the explosion, but that it was corrected with a patch and did not lead to the explosion, to his understanding. He added that U.S. Steel had monitors to watch for any leaks,” the local news station reported. “The valve itself was last replaced in 2015, Tikey said. He does not believe the explosion was due to old equipment.”

Instead, the USW official blamed contractors for the fatal explosion in an effort to protect the company and the USW bureaucracy’s own role in colluding with management’s savage cost-cutting that undermines workplace safety. “As he understands it,” KDKA reported, “contractors ‘significantly overpressurized,’ the valve with water as they were flushing it ahead of planned maintenance, causing the valve to split, releasing gas that would eventually ignite.”

As the wife of the Clairton steelworkers told the WSWS, “It is always blame the employees even when an issue is

brought to their attention months before anything happens and nothing is done about it."

A former steelworker who had worked at the Clairton mill, including on the 13 and 14 batteries, wanted to know what safety equipment the workers were wearing at the time of the explosion and where the injured were located. "If they were wearing SCBA (self-contained breathing apparatus) and survived the initial blast but [were] knocked out, the SCBA would protect them from suffocation."

In addition to the general worn-down nature of the plant, the Clairton steelworker detailed several areas of grave concern, including: the enormous amount of coal dust throughout the mill; being instructed to work in areas of high gas without a gas monitor; and welding being done near and above flammable gasses.

The worker explained that he did not have direct knowledge of what caused the August 11 explosion, but pointed to the general state of the plant that led to this and other disasters.

"Coal dust lays on every surface and floor of the plant," the worker said. "Sometimes feet high, just one cigarette butt away from ignition."

"All dust is extremely flammable," a retired construction worker who specializes in air, water and fire damage restoration. "Individual particles are so small and close together. Once one particle ignites it sets off a chain reaction," the worker explained.

Neither US Steel nor the United Steelworkers have addressed the presence of coal dust throughout the facility or discussed its potential role in contributing to the severity of the explosion. This would be one of the topics an independent workers' investigation would have to take.

Coal dust in coal mines is known to be a major factor in fires and explosions. The 2010 Upper Big Branch disaster that killed 29 coal miners was caused when a spark from faulty equipment ignited a pocket of methane gas.

The Clairton steelworker also pointed out the lack of safety in and around high gas areas: "We work around dangerous gases. There is no way around that." He explained that areas known to have high levels of gas or the possibility of high levels have warnings posted.

"When you work in such an area you should be wearing a gas monitor that will warn you when levels are high. I have been advised that it is 'safe to travel through high gas hazard areas as long as you are quick'... without a gas monitor," he said.

"In my time there I have seen hot work (welding) being done near and above flammable gases and liquids. I have seen cigarettes being smoked in close proximity to extremely flammable gases. The transfer of 13/14 battery was a designated smoking area while the reversing room sat

just feet away."

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.

The USW bureaucracy operates joint labor-management safety committees with US Steel, and would have been fully aware of any safety complaints by workers. These committees provide cushy jobs for union bureaucrats who defend the company's interests. In the steel mills, oil refineries and other industries, these corporatist committees have been instrumental in the cover-up of fatalities and injuries, including the deaths of Ben and Max Morrissey at the BP Husky refinery in Oregon, Ohio, near Toledo, in September 2022.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) call for an independent workers' inquiry into this tragedy. Building on the investigation of the death of Stellantis worker Ronald Adams Sr., this inquiry will expose both the immediate events that led to the explosion and the longstanding practices of corporate neglect and union collusion.

The lost lives and the shattered families must not be swept under the rug through endless coverups 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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