

## One month since the death of Timothy Quinn and Steven Menefee USW remains silent on Clairton Coke Works explosion

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It has now been more than four weeks since the explosion at US Steel's Clairton Coke Works that killed steelworkers Timothy Quinn and Steven Menefee and injured 10 others, yet the United Steelworkers union has remained almost completely silent.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has initiated an independent, rank-and-file investigation into the August 11 explosion at US Steel's Clairton Coke Works to uncover the truth about the conditions that led to this disaster.

Such an independent rank-and-file investigation will follow in the example of the IWA-RFC investigation into the death of the April 7 death of Dundee Engine skilled trades worker Ronald Adams Sr. Initial results of the IWA-RFC investigation found that among other items, the company, with the United Auto Workers blessing, distributed "cheater" keys that bypass lockout/tagout protections, which allowed the accident to happen.

The IWA-RFC investigation at US Steel's Clairton Coke Works is completely independent from corporate management and the United Steelworkers bureaucracy, which works hand in hand with US Steel management to push production and profits at the expense of the health and safety of steelworkers.

The United Steelworkers have only made a perfunctory statement on the day of the explosion, not even acknowledging the death of their members, while pledging to work with government and company investigators:

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 held a token rally in downtown Pittsburgh on August 22 of no more than 100 people, mostly USW officials and staff members, opposing the gutting of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration undertaken by Trump. The USW press account of the rally does not even mention the explosion and death of the workers at Clairton Coke Works.

In fact, a search of the USW website, USW.org, does not turn up any mention of the death of either Timothy Quinn or Steven Menefee.

According to the USW, the health and safety of workers will need to give way to keep the mills profitable. Workers at the Clairton Coke Works have been told that if they "want Clairton to survive," they must work six

days a week, 12 hours a day repairing the damage to the blast furnaces.

The WSWS referred to this explosion and the death of Timothy Quinn and Steven Menefee as "social murder," referring to the push for profits at the expense of safety, the elimination of government regulations by both Democrats and Republicans in the name of increasing production, the gutting of safety regulations and inspections over the past 50 years and the need to promote US production for war at the expense of workers.

The WSWS wrote:

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.

The USW bureaucrats long since stopped representing the interests of steelworkers, even in the most minimal sense of the word. Instead they function as a second layer of management, working to enforce production and profitability at the expense of workers' health, safety and livelihood.

The USW is itself a giant organization with over \$1.8 billion in assets and a 2023 revenue of half a billion dollars, mostly coming from members' dues, but also from interest and stock market earnings.

Meanwhile, the USW lists expenses of nearly half a billion dollars a year, mostly going to staff, offices and property. While holding a \$500 million strike fund, the USW pays out a minimal strike benefit of only \$250 a week, and then only after 4 weeks on strike.

The US Steel-United Steelworkers (USW) Joint Labor-Management Health and Safety Committees (JHSCs) are another form through which the company and union collaborate against the interests of the workers.

Positions on the JHSC go to chosen officials or members who receive paid time off for monthly meetings, plant inspections and four training days per year.

Steelworkers are supposed to be given a "STOP WORK" card, but many never received them when hired, or they get destroyed during normal conditions in the mill. According to the USW contract, workers are supposed to be allowed to refuse work if they believe it is unsafe.

The small print, however, makes this mechanism generally ineffectual and virtually useless. The contract states that safety hazards must be "beyond normal hazards" and that the worker is "acting in good faith and based on objective evidence" in making their refusal.

And even then, the employee must notify their supervisor, who may

demand the employee do the work or, or give them the “right” to be relieved from duty, starting the grievance process, which can take years to resolve.

## What is known so far about the explosion

A faulty valve in the reversing room for the 13 and 14 batteries had been leaking for 2 to 4 weeks before the explosion.

According to USW Local 1557 Vice President Richard Tikey, the valve was patched and a contractor over-pressurized the valve during maintenance, causing it to split, releasing the gas that then ignited.

“As he (Tikey) 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.”

Steelworkers have pointed out that the valve should have been replaced, not patched, and that the proper practices would have been to first isolate and purge the pipes of explosive gas by pumping in nitrogen gas.

Furthermore, two steelworkers told the WSWS that the foreman overseeing the process was a production foreman rather than the safety foreman. According to one worker, no more than 50 psi of pressure was to be applied, but the production foreman told the vendor to apply full pressure before the valve ruptured.

The fact that contractors are now routinely in the mill, working on the batteries, doing maintenance and other work formerly done by steelworkers is itself the product of a long history of betrayals by the USW, which has allowed US Steel to replace members in the name of “remaining competitive.”

The investigation has so far determined that this was not an isolated accident, but part a series of practices by the company and allowed by the union which put the profits of US Steel above the health and safety of workers.

Many workers stated:

? That in general problems exist throughout the mill that are at best only patched, not fixed.

? That the “B” battery is in particular disrepair.

? That coal dust is allowed to accumulate throughout the plant.

? That welding is done in areas of high gas.

? That workers are required to work without the proper safety equipment.

Furthermore, workers from US Steel’s Irvin and Edgar Thomson works report dealing with similar issues.

There are still many questions that need to be answered and that can only be achieved through a fully independent workers’ inquiry into the explosion, the conditions that led to the explosion and the record of safety at US Steel Clairton Coke Works as well as all US Steel facilities.

The role of the USW can only be understood as part of the long process of transformation.

As part of the massive upsurge of workers struggles during the depression of the 1930s, the Steelworkers Organizing Committee (SWOC) was formed in 1936 and in 1937 received recognition and improved conditions at US Steel.

A bitter battle was conducted later that year to organize Bethlehem Steel and Republic Steel, including violent confrontations known as the Memorial Day Massacre. Known as “Little Steel,” Bethlehem, Republic and others did not recognize the union until 1941.

The following year, 1942, SWOC was disbanded and the United Steelworkers of America, later renamed United Steelworkers, was formed.

At the end of World War II, steel production in the United States was at

its peak and accounted for over 50 percent of world production. The trade unions, though led by anticommunist bureaucrats who supported American capitalism, were able to win improvements in wages as well as health benefits and pensions. At work locations, important standards for health and safety were also established.

But when the US began to lose its dominant role, the ruling class could no longer pursue a policy of class compromise and began a relentless assault on the working class.

The trade union bureaucracy responded to this assault on the working class, not by mobilizing the strength of the working class against the capitalist system, but by integrating themselves with the corporations.

The massive closure of mills throughout the 1980s and 1990s left hundreds of thousands of steelworkers and related workers out of work. Steel mills were shut throughout southwestern Pennsylvania, Buffalo, Youngstown, Cleveland, Detroit, Gary and Chicago, as well as Baltimore and Philadelphia. Workers at US Steel, Bethlehem, LTV, Republic, National, Inland, Wheeling-Pittsburgh and others lost their jobs, pensions and health benefits.

Today, the USW is playing the same role—they are completely integrated with the company and the government in their attack on the workers.

While silent on the Clairton explosion, for the past two years the USW has sent scores if not hundreds of text messages to their members, with written statements, op-eds and speeches, against the Nippon Steel purchase of US Steel.

Their central preoccupation was that the sale of US Steel to Nippon Steel would undermine the “national security” of the United States, in reality the interests of US capitalism against foreign competition. This they falsely equated with the defense of jobs in the United States, at the expense of jobs everywhere else.

While the USW has not endorsed Trump’s decision to sign off on the Nippon Steel purchase, they have supported Trump’s tariffs and the unions are endorsing his “America First” trade war measures. They are making their pitch to help the ruling class to convert the United States and North America into a fortress for launching world war.

Steelworkers must reject the toxic nationalism of the USW in favor of a global strategy uniting steelworkers in every country against the corporate oligarchs in each country. Workers must reject the slogan of “America First” in favor of the slogan, “Workers of the World, Unite!”

This requires a fight against the corrupt union apparatus, building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) as the new organizing center in a fight to transfer power from the union officialdom to the shop floor.



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