

As union continues silence

Pittsburgh-area steelworkers at Edgar Thomson Steel Works support call for independent investigation into Clairton Coke Works explosion

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Despite initial pledges of transparency and openness, both US Steel Corporation and the United Steelworkers have remained quiet on the August 11 explosion at the company's Clairton Coke Works that killed 52-year-old Steven Menefee and Timothy Quinn, age 39.

Their silence is an indication that both US Steel and the United Steelworkers are working to cover up the explosion and the company's record of putting profits before workers' safety.

"We're being told nothing," said a steelworker at the nearby Edgar Thomson mill. "They don't want an investigation, they just want to move on and pour steel." The WSWS is not publishing the names of steelworkers to protect them from retaliation.

According to the limited statements made by US Steel, the explosion was linked to maintenance preparations in which a valve cracked as it was being flushed with water. This allowed coke oven gas to fill the area, resulting in the explosion.

USW Local 1557 Vice President Richard Tikey is the only union official to speak on record. He disputed initial reports from workers that the valve had been leaking for two to four weeks prior to the explosion. He claims that the valve was patched and agrees with US Steel that it blew out when it was being flushed.

Many questions remain:

- Was the valve that failed the same as the one that workers reported leaking?
- Why was water being used to flush the valve instead of using a non-explosive gas like nitrogen?

- What warning was given to workers when the gas leak was detected? How much time did they have to clear the area?

- What was the ignition source?

- Many people reported hearing secondary explosions, yet other reports deny that. What is the truth?

- What was the role of accumulated coal dust in the force of the explosion and any secondary explosions that may have occurred?

The Clairton Coke works has a long record of disregard for basic safety and maintenance at the mill. Yet these conditions are allowed to continue.

In addition, neither US Steel nor the United Steelworkers have reported on the condition of the injured workers. They have not even been identified.

The nature of their injuries has not been given. While "critical but stable" is used for some of those injured, there is no public breakdown of the types of injuries—burns, trauma, fractures, amputations, etc.

Nor has there been any report on long-term prognoses or updates on individual recoveries.

Such questions will only be obtained 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's other facilities.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has initiated such an inquiry. It follows the example of the IWA-RFC investigation

into the April 7 death of autoworker Ronald Adams Sr. at Stellantis' Dundee Engine Plant in Michigan.

Workers at US Steel's Edgar Thomson mill spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the investigation into the explosion at Clairton and about conditions at their mill.

Like the Clairton Coke Works, the Edgar Thomson mill is part of US Steel's Mon-Valley works and sits about 10 miles downstream from Clairton on the east bank of the Monongahela River.

Edgar Thomson mill is older than US Steel itself, having first been built in 1875 as part of the industrial boom after the Civil War. It is the first steel mill in the United States to use the Bessemer converter to make steel, a process that made steel affordable and available in large quantities, enabling rapid growth in the railroad, construction and other industries.

"Everywhere you go, there are signs for safety. But what really matters is production," said one worker.

"All we do is put bandaids on everything. We've been told for years that they are going to invest in this plant. But we don't see it.

"They are saying now that a contractor was at fault [in the explosion]. I don't know, but who was watching them? Who was telling them it was okay to do what they did? We have lots of contractors here. Some of them are really good and know what they are doing. But the company is always looking for the lowest cost.

"Sometimes there are more contractors than steelworkers. Often we are assigned to work with a contractor. Everyone is afraid for their job, look around, [referring to the destruction of industrial jobs in the Pittsburgh region] where else can I find a job that pays this well?

"We should have our own investigation. There is no doubt they want to cover it up. Anytime there is an accident or something goes wrong, they look for ways to blame it on us."

Another Edgar Thomson worker told the WSWS, "There is preventive maintenance at the plant. It seems like they wait till it breaks or until someone gets hurt. Then they blame the workers for things breaking or causing down-time for the plant. Then the workers usually lose their jobs."

He added, "When you turn stuff in, it takes forever for them to fix the things. The blast furnace is the worst. The boss that runs it, runs it like it's his own

playground."

The silence by the United Steelworkers only ensures that the company will continue its practice, leading to further accidents, injuries and death.

The United Steelworkers has long since become an agent of the companies, working with management to help maintain the profitability of US Steel against its competitors.

For decades, the USW has promoted nationalism and chauvinism, working to divide steelworkers in the United States from their class brothers and sisters in Europe, Asia and Latin America. Meanwhile, the companies cut tens of thousands of jobs, closed mills and imposed concessions.

Today they are allied with the Trump administration and support the imposition of tariffs. They say steelworkers must support Trump's agenda of "America First" directed against China and in preparation for war.

The USW does not oppose Trump's dictatorial and fascist agenda. In fact, they seek to use the same methods to suppress opposition from steelworkers within their own union.

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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