

US Steel contests OSHA fines for deadly Clairton Coke Works explosion

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Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has fined US Steel and contractor MPW Industrial Services \$180,000 for the deaths of two workers in the explosion at the US Steel Clairton Coke Works last year. But even this pittance for the lives of Timothy Quinn and Steven Menefee was too much for the companies to pay. OSHA records show both companies formally challenged the citations on February 27 for one of the region's deadliest industrial accidents in recent years.

OSHA proposed roughly \$118,000 in penalties against US Steel and about \$61,000 against MPW Industrial Services following a federal investigation into the August 11, 2025 explosion. The fines amount to a fraction of the revenue and profits for the company. According to figures from 2024, the company took in \$120,000 in revenue every 4 minutes and made \$120,000 in profit every 2 hours and 45 minutes.

US Steel's Chief Executive Officer David Burritt's reported \$16.7 million compensation package in 2023 means he pockets the equivalent of the OSHA fine in less than 3 days. Using the reported \$108.8 million payout Burritt received in connection with the Nippon Steel acquisition, the scale of the OSHA penalties becomes even more striking—Burritt's merger windfall alone amounted to the equivalent of the roughly \$120,000 OSHA fine in just under 9.7 hours.

Most of the citations were classified as "serious" violations involving alleged failures to properly control hazardous energy, maintain safe procedures and protect workers from explosive coke oven gas and high-pressure systems during maintenance work at the sprawling Allegheny County facility. The explosion occurred during planned maintenance operations at the Clairton Coke Works, one of the nation's largest coke-making facilities and a key supplier for steelmaking operations in the Mon Valley.

Federal investigators said workers were flushing a gas valve when the equipment ruptured, releasing combustible coke oven gas that ignited in a powerful blast. Timothy Quinn and Steven Menefee were killed, while 11 others suffered injuries ranging from burns to trauma caused by the explosion.

The contest filings mean the citations will now move into the federal Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission process, where companies frequently seek to reduce penalties

or challenge OSHA's factual findings—which is sure to happen as the Trump administration has cut OSHA staff and inserted pro-business people into leadership positions. But the lack of meaningful fines is not only the product of the Trump administration but the product of the collaboration of both big business parties.

OSHA's maximum penalties were effectively frozen from 1990 until 2016, when the maximum penalty for a serious violation was only about \$7,000, while the maximum penalty for a willful or repeat violation was capped at \$70,000. In 2016, under the Obama administration, fines were increased but only pegged to the inflation rate. Today, the maximum penalty for a serious violation is \$16,500—and it is very rare that a company is fined even this amount when a death occurs. The Center for Progressive Reform found that the median OSHA penalty issued in worker death cases during the Obama administration was just \$5,800—"less than the cost of an average funeral."

In an initial investigative update, the US Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB) said evidence indicates the explosion originated from the catastrophic failure of a cast iron valve in the coke oven gas system. The valve, manufactured in 1953 and refurbished in 2013, was more than 70 years old at the time of the disaster. Investigators found that the 18-inch cast iron gas isolation valve had catastrophically split open along a fully circumferential crack after workers attempted to flush it during maintenance operations. During the investigation, the agency also identified three additional cracked valves elsewhere in the same battery system, which were removed for metallurgical testing.

The CSB raised concerns about US Steel's continued use of cast iron components in a system exposed to the extreme operating conditions of coke production. Cast iron can become increasingly brittle when subjected to repeated thermal cycling—the constant heating and cooling associated with coke oven operations, as well as prolonged exposure to hydrogen and corrosive coke oven gases. Investigators warned those conditions can weaken the material over time and increase the likelihood of cracking or sudden catastrophic failure.

In December 2025, the CSB issued an unusual safety warning to US Steel after investigators concluded that workers at the Clairton Coke Works could still be exposed to the same kinds

of hazards that contributed to the deadly explosion. The agency identified “potentially unmitigated hazards” requiring immediate attention, particularly involving workers’ presence in and around the coke batteries and reversing rooms. The warning suggested that, months after the blast, dangerous conditions remained insufficiently addressed at the plant.

In interviews published by the *World Socialist Web Site* after the explosion, workers at the Clairton Coke Works described a plant plagued by deteriorating infrastructure, deferred maintenance and relentless pressure to keep production running despite obvious hazards. One worker described Battery B as “pretty much rigged together,” adding, “Things fall apart, and they refuse to go out and fix them.”

Workers described coal dust accumulating “feet high” on every surface, with one saying the plant was “just one cigarette butt away from ignition.” Another alleged that workers were sometimes instructed to move through high-gas areas without gas monitors as long as they moved quickly. Several workers described a culture in which management was “reactive to everything”—waiting until equipment broke or someone was hurt before acting. “When you turn stuff in,” one worker said, “it takes forever for them to fix the things.”

Workers who spoke to the Associated Press and PublicSource echoed these concerns. Renee Hough, a utility technician at the plant, said that many needed repairs were not being prioritized: “you can’t stop production.” Longtime worker Brian Caughey told AP that maintenance problems had persisted for years and that workers had long feared a catastrophic incident could occur because repairs were delayed while production continued.

More than 5,000 workers are killed on the job each year in the United States. In 2024, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics recorded 5,070 fatal workplace injuries—a fatality rate of 3.3 deaths per 100,000 full-time workers.

The fatal explosion at the Clairton Coke Works has once again exposed the role of the United Steelworkers apparatus as a partner of corporate management, subordinating workers’ lives and safety to the profit demands of US Steel. The deaths of Timothy Quinn and Steven Menefee were treated not as the outcome of systemic negligence but as an isolated “incident,” even as federal investigators uncovered widespread failures involving aging infrastructure and hazardous gas systems. For nearly five months the United Steelworkers website usw.org did not publish a word about their deaths. When an article finally appeared in December, it focused overwhelmingly on grief support, counseling and donations—without assigning responsibility for the explosion or detailing the safety allegations raised by workers, OSHA or the CSB.

For decades, the USW bureaucracy has integrated itself into a corporatist framework built around labor-management “partnership.” Through joint safety committees and closed-door collaboration with executives, union officials have functioned not as representatives of workers but as industrial managers tasked with maintaining labor discipline and

uninterrupted production. Workers at Clairton repeatedly complained that dangerous conditions were ignored, that broken equipment was patched together instead of replaced, and that production demands overrode safety concerns. Yet these conditions persisted under the watch of both management and the union apparatus, which had full knowledge of the deteriorating state of the plant.

As steel corporations shut mills, cut jobs and intensified production pressures over the last half-century, the union leadership increasingly tied its fortunes to the profitability of the corporations themselves. Rather than organizing workers across national boundaries, the USW leadership argued that American workers had to align themselves with “their” employers and the US state to defend domestic jobs—framing global competition as a struggle between nations rather than between workers and corporations. Such nationalist poison only serves to divide and weaken workers in the face of the attacks by multinational corporations operating globally.

The deaths of Timothy Quinn and Steven Menefee at the Clairton Coke Works demonstrate that workers cannot entrust their lives and safety to corporate management, government regulators or the United Steelworkers bureaucracy, all of which function within a labor-management framework subordinated to the profit interests of US Steel. What is required is the building of rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and independent of the union apparatus, to put control of safety and production conditions in the hands of those who labor inside the mills every day. Such committees would provide workers with the means to expose dangerous conditions suppressed by management, organize collectively across departments and plants, and enforce workers’ right to halt unsafe operations without retaliation. The struggle for rank-and-file control is inseparable from a broader fight to unite steelworkers internationally against the global corporations that pit workers against one another while sacrificing lives in the pursuit of profit and “competitiveness.”



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