

US Steel electrician Mitchael Nelson electrocuted at Granite City Works

Samuel Davidson
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Mitchael N. Nelson, a 62-year-old electrician, was electrocuted early Saturday morning at US Steel's Granite City Works in southwestern Illinois.

Nelson, a member of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 1899 from Bridgeton, Missouri, had reportedly worked at the plant for 14 years. According to the Madison County coroner's office, Nelson and two other employees were working on a transformer that malfunctioned during a storm. Nelson was attempting to shut it off when he was electrocuted.

Emergency responders were called at 4:53 a.m. on July 11. Nelson was pronounced dead at 6:20 a.m. after lifesaving efforts. An autopsy found the preliminary cause of death was electrocution, with toxicology results pending. No other injuries were reported.

USW District 7 Director Mike Millsap separately told the *Times of Northwest Indiana* that Nelson died in a "high-voltage flash." A full account is needed to establish whether he was killed by direct electrical contact, an arc flash or another failure.

The incident occurred in the plant's cold mill, where electrically driven rolls reduce the thickness of hot-rolled steel. Its high-voltage systems, rotating equipment, hydraulic pressure, pinch points and stored energy make strict isolation procedures essential during maintenance and troubleshooting.

It must be established why the transformer malfunctioned, what procedure governed the attempt to shut it off, whether it was possible to de-energize it remotely and whether lockout/tagout and arc-flash protections were in place. Workers must know whether problems with the transformer had previously been reported, whether maintenance was delayed, who planned and authorized the work and whether staffing or production pressures played a role.

US Steel issued a perfunctory statement claiming that "safety is our top priority" and promising to cooperate with investigations. The USW said its safety coordinator, local representatives, Health and Safety Department, Emergency Response Team and union leadership had mobilized to support the family and Local 1899. It added, "There will be a comprehensive investigation."

Workers can place no confidence in an investigation controlled by the company, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) or the USW apparatus. US Steel has a financial interest in limiting the investigation to the immediate circumstances of Nelson's death while concealing any role played by deferred maintenance, inadequate staffing or management decisions. OSHA penalties are generally a negligible cost of doing business, while the USW operates joint labor-management safety committees with US Steel and subordinates safety to the continued profitable operation of the mills.

Granite City workers must organize to demand answers. Given the

intimate connections between the USW hierarchy and management, workers should form an independent rank-and-file safety committee, controlled by workers themselves, to raise the following demands:

1. The preservation and release of all maintenance records, work orders, electrical diagrams, safety reports, surveillance video, electronic control data and internal communications connected to the accident.

2. The release of the job assignment, written procedure, permits, lockout/tagout documentation and pre-job safety records, including the names and positions of those who planned, supervised and authorized the work.

3. The right of workers selected by their coworkers to inspect the affected equipment, interview witnesses and bring in genuinely independent electrical, engineering and industrial safety experts.

4. No restart of the equipment or resumption of work in the affected area until the committee is satisfied that the hazard has been identified and eliminated, with full pay for workers during any safety shutdown.

5. Complete protection against retaliation for workers who report hazards or speak publicly, and publication of all findings to the workforce and the victim's family.

Previous deaths at Granite City Works

Nelson's death follows other documented fatalities at the mill, which is more than 130 years old.

In March 2017, 42-year-old Timothy Dagon was fatally injured in the plant's rail yard. Dagon, a Local 1899 member, died at a St. Louis hospital approximately two hours after the accident. US Steel released few details about how he was injured.

In February 2005, 46-year-old David M. Prengel, who had worked at the mill for 26 years, was killed while guiding a string of seven coil cars into a shipping building. Prengel was directing the locomotive operator by radio when he was crushed between the ribs of a coil car and a loading platform.

The deaths occurred in different sections of the sprawling plant, each involving the immense movement of energy, machinery and material through an integrated steel mill.

Granite City repeatedly idled and restarted

Nelson's death occurred just over three months after US Steel resumed primary steel production at Granite City following the mill's second major restart in less than a decade.

US Steel idled steelmaking operations in December 2015, affecting approximately 1,800 workers. In March 2018, amid higher steel prices and the Trump administration's tariffs on imported steel, it announced the restart of one blast furnace. A second returned to operation later that year.

The revival proved temporary. US Steel idled the A blast furnace in 2019. In September 2023, it temporarily idled the remaining B blast furnace, blaming reduced demand associated with that year's United Auto Workers strike against Ford, General Motors and Stellantis. In November, the company announced the indefinite idling of Granite City's iron- and steelmaking operations. The mill's finishing operations continued processing slabs shipped from other US Steel facilities. By mid-2025, employment had fallen to approximately 900, compared with roughly 1,800 before the COVID-19 pandemic, and some finishing operations were running only intermittently.

Nippon Steel completed its takeover of US Steel in June 2025 under a national security agreement with the Trump administration. The agreement included billions of dollars in promised investments, but Granite City was absent from the publicly identified major projects. The mill was also protected from major reductions in production capacity only until June 2027, significantly less than several other US Steel facilities.

Local 1899 officials, Representative Nikki Budzinski and local politicians demanded at least \$500 million for Granite City, acknowledging the scale of improvements required at the aging mill. Neither US Steel nor Nippon Steel publicly accepted the demand.

In September 2025, three months after the acquisition, US Steel announced plans to stop sending slabs to Granite City and effectively suspend its remaining finishing operations. The company reversed course after Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick informed it that President Trump would use the federal government's "golden share" authority to block the plan.

US Steel announced in December that it would restart the B blast furnace, which had been idle since September 2023. The furnace returned to operation at the end of March after a months-long process. The company added approximately 400 employees, bringing the workforce to roughly 1,200 to 1,300.

The cold mill belonged to the finishing side of the complex, which had continued operating while primary steelmaking was idled. Nevertheless, the wider expansion could have affected production, staffing and maintenance demands across the plant. It must be determined whether the cold mill's workload increased, whether each shift had enough experienced electrical and maintenance workers, whether newly hired workers received sufficient training and whether aging equipment was thoroughly inspected as production expanded.

Steven Menefee and injured 11 other workers. It occurred as workers flushed a 70+-year-old coke-oven gas isolation valve during maintenance. The valve ruptured, releasing highly combustible gas that ignited. The U.S. Chemical Safety Board reported that additional valves recovered from the scene also showed signs of damage.

OSHA cited US Steel for inadequate or outdated procedures, training and maintenance practices. Its proposed penalties amounted to only \$118,214, which the corporation is contesting.

Clairton workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the explosion was preventable. They described an aging plant in serious disrepair, where workers repeatedly reported hazards but repairs were postponed until a future outage or "big project." Management routinely allowed defective equipment to remain in operation and carried out repairs without proper safety precautions.

The U.S. Chemical Safety Board issued interim recommendations before completing its investigation. It found that US Steel had reconstructed the damaged gas piping in almost the same location and layout as before the explosion, while buildings occupied by Quinn, Menefee and other injured workers could not protect them from explosion hazards. The company planned to move control rooms approximately 100 feet but had not completed the facility-siting evaluation needed to establish that the new location was safe.

As of this writing, the USW has not made public an independent report into the deaths of Quinn and Menefee or explained what its safety representatives and joint labor-management committees had found. Workers told the WSWS that after the explosion they were pressed to work six-day weeks and 12-hour shifts to repair the damage and restore production. The union did not organize opposition to this schedule and collaborated in reopening the plant.

The same process is being prepared at Granite City: statements of sympathy, closed-door cooperation between company and union safety officials, a prolonged government investigation and continued production without a complete account to the workforce.

Granite City workers should reject this process. A rank-and-file committee must uncover the truth about Nelson's death and fight for workers' control over safety, full staffing and maintenance, the replacement of antiquated equipment and an end to production whenever conditions threaten workers' lives. These measures cannot be subordinated to US Steel's profits, Nippon Steel's investment calculations or the USW bureaucracy's corporatist partnership with management.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

The lessons of the Clairton Coke Works explosion

Workers should place no confidence in the USW's promise of a "comprehensive investigation," given the union's conduct following the August 11, 2025 explosion at US Steel's Clairton Coke Works near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The explosion killed 39-year-old Timothy Quinn and 52-year-old