

Young father killed at Cleveland-Cliffs Burns Harbor steel mill

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On August 13, 28-year-old worker Jonathan Stepp was killed while operating a pot hauler at the Cleveland-Cliffs Burns Harbor Works in northwest Indiana. Stepp, of Merrillville, Indiana, was a young father and a second-generation member of International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 150.

Stepp was the second worker killed in a US steel mill in little more than a month; on July 11, 62-year-old electrician Mitcheal Nelson was electrocuted at US Steel's Granite City Works in Illinois while trying to shut off a malfunctioning transformer.

Few details of the accident have been made public. What is known is that Stepp was operating a pot hauler—a massive industrial vehicle used to move pots of molten or extremely hot slag—when he was killed.

Stepp was a contractor from Phoenix Services, which performs slag handling and other mill services at Burns Harbor, on the southern end of Lake Michigan roughly 50 miles east of Chicago. Phoenix is owned by SunCoke Energy, which purchased the company for \$325 million last year and operates at 19 steel and stainless-steel mills internationally. Announcing the acquisition, SunCoke described Phoenix's work as "mission-critical" and said the deal would produce \$5 million to \$10 million in annual corporate "synergies."

Neither Cleveland-Cliffs nor SunCoke has explained what caused Stepp's death. SunCoke issued the standard corporate declaration that safety is its "highest priority" and said it was cooperating with the Indiana Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and local authorities.

Jonathan Stepp was born January 14, 1998, in Rensselaer, Indiana, and graduated from Kankakee Valley High School in 2016. He joined the US Army in 2017 and remained until 2022. That same year Stepp lost his father, William Stepp Jr., in an automobile accident at 48. Jonathan followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a union operating engineer in June 2024.

Stepp leaves behind his mother, Carrie Stepp; his fiancée, Sierra Samuels; and six children in their mixed family:

Sophie, Dawson, Elijah, Aidan, Asher and Addy. His obituary said his greatest joy was time with his family, friends and children.

IUOE Local 150 established a fundraiser for Stepp's family, which, as of this writing, had raised more than \$60,000 from over 440 donors. The money is being placed in a family trust. Visitation was held Sunday in Wheatfield, Indiana and Stepp was buried Monday at DeMotte Cemetery.

Comments on Facebook reflected anger over another worker's death. One worker wrote that Cleveland-Cliffs' "safety practices need to be investigated," adding that anyone familiar with the steel industry knows it is a dangerous mill. Another asked why the union wasn't there to prevent it.

Mitcheal Nelson, killed at Granite City a month earlier, was a USW Local 1899 member and electrician who had worked at the mill for 14 years. He leaves behind a daughter, four grandchildren, his parents and a sister. Nelson was electrocuted while trying to shut off a transformer that malfunctioned during a storm. USW District 7 Director Mike Millsap described the accident as a "high-voltage flash," but more than six weeks later no public explanation has been given of what failed or why.

A history of deaths and dangerous failures at Burns Harbor

Stepp's death is not the first fatal accident at Burns Harbor, nor the first indication of serious failures in maintenance and safety systems at the sprawling mill.

On August 21, 2015, 61-year-old Kenneth Gish, a member of USW Local 6787, was killed after falling from scaffolding in the basic oxygen furnace when Burns Harbor was owned by ArcelorMittal. Fourteen years earlier, under Bethlehem Steel, a fire killed a company millwright and a

contractor supervisor and injured four others while they removed equipment from a coke oven gas line connected to a decommissioned furnace. The Chemical Safety Board found inadequate supervision of the work; Indiana OSHA cited Bethlehem Steel for four serious violations and proposed penalties totaling just \$9,875.

More recently, on July 16, 2020, an explosion and fire tore through Blast Furnace D at Burns Harbor. No workers were killed, but Cleveland-Cliffs later estimated property damage at approximately \$22 million. A CSB report found that the dome of a blast-furnace stove had catastrophically separated under operating pressure after corrosion reduced part of the steel shell from one inch to roughly one-tenth of an inch, with an inadequately welded repair patch far short of the needed thickness. The CSB concluded the mill's mechanical-integrity program lacked effective inspection and weld-repair practices.

There is no evidence connecting Stepp's death to the 2020 explosion. But the earlier incidents establish a documented history at Burns Harbor in which workers, including contractors, have been exposed to deadly hazards involving deteriorated equipment and failed safety procedures.

Indiana OSHA has opened an investigation into Stepp's death and has up to six months to complete it. Workers at Burns Harbor may therefore wait months before even the agency's limited conclusions become known.

The record demonstrates what workers can expect. On August 11, 2025, an explosion ripped through US Steel's Clairton Coke Works near Pittsburgh, killing Steven Menefee and Timothy Quinn and injuring 11 other workers, five seriously. OSHA did not announce its findings until February 18, more than six months later, concluding that US Steel had exposed workers to explosion hazards and violated process safety management and hazardous-energy-control requirements.

For an explosion that killed two workers and injured 11 others, OSHA proposed penalties against US Steel totaling just \$118,214—less than one hour of the company's revenue. Contractor MPW Industrial Services was cited for another \$61,473. Both companies contested the citations. OSHA's investigations principally follow deaths and serious injuries and generally culminate in penalties amounting to a minor cost of doing business for major corporations.

Stepp's death at Burns Harbor and Nelson's death at Granite City are not isolated tragedies. They take place amid decades of corporate restructuring with the complicity of the USW bureaucracy during which time tens of thousands of steel jobs have disappeared, remaining work has been consolidated and contracted out, and aging facilities subjected to relentless pressure for productivity.

The latest deaths come as the USW bureaucracy conducts

simultaneous contract negotiations covering roughly 23,000 workers at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs. The current agreements expire September 1. Burns Harbor is covered by the Cleveland-Cliffs master agreement, with its production workforce represented by USW Local 6787.

The USW's own bargaining updates reveal the framework within which it approaches safety. On August 7, the union said it and management were jointly reviewing capital and maintenance projects aimed at keeping the mills operating "safely, efficiently, and reliably," praising \$4 billion in previous capital spending as supporting the company's "long-term competitiveness." An August 21 update, issued just eight days after Stepp's death, said safety remained a "top priority" and pointed to quarterly joint union-management Safety and Health Meetings established under the existing contract.

But neither the USW nor IUOE Local 150 has publicly demanded immediate disclosure of everything known about Stepp's death, including the pot hauling equipment's maintenance history, his work assignment, training records, eyewitness accounts or whether hazards had previously been reported.

The union bureaucracy accepts the premise that workers' interests depend upon maintaining the profitability and competitiveness of the steel corporations. For decades it has subordinated wages, staffing and working conditions to lowering costs while promoting tariffs and economic nationalism against workers abroad. This program identifies workers with the corporations that employ them.

Workers' lives cannot be defended through partnership with the corporations whose profits depend upon their exploitation. What is required is the independent organization of steelworkers themselves, including permanent rank-and-file safety committees with the power to halt production immediately when conditions are unsafe. These committees must unite direct employees and contractors, USW members, operating engineers and all other workers in the mills, rejecting divisions based on employer, union jurisdiction or nationality.

If a genuine investigation is to be conducted and those responsible held accountable it will have to be done by rank-and-file workers themselves. We urge steelworkers with knowledge of the conditions that led to Stepp's death and other unsafe conditions to fill out the form below. Your identity will be protected.



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