US Steel Clairton disaster exposes 13 years of OSHA failure under Democratic and Republican administrations

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The final federal investigation into the fatal August 11, 2025 explosion at US Steel's Clairton Coke Works exposes the failure of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to protect workers from hazards that management refuses to correct. For more than a decade, OSHA repeatedly inspected Clairton while conditions that contributed to the deaths of steelworkers Steven Menefee and Timothy Quinn remained uncorrected.

The US Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB) concluded that their deaths, as well as two of the five serious injuries, could have been prevented or reduced had occupied buildings been moved away from hazardous coke oven gas piping or constructed to withstand an explosion.

The danger had been identified decades earlier. In 2003, a US Steel Process Hazard Analysis team recommended studying the location of occupied buildings around the coke batteries. Management rejected the recommendation. Then, in 2010, another coke oven gas explosion injured 20 workers. Yet the company still did not conduct the siting study or move workers away from the danger.

There is no indication in the public record that OSHA required US Steel to determine whether its coke oven gas operation was covered by the Process Safety Management standard or to correct the dangerous siting of occupied buildings. The record spans the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations and demonstrates that steelworkers cannot entrust their lives to OSHA, to another change of administration, or to the United Steelworkers bureaucracy, which has functioned throughout as a partner to management rather than a defender of workers' lives. Workplace safety must be placed under the control of workers themselves through independent rank-and-file committees.

These findings arrive as the USW prepares to hand another five-year contract to US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs, covering 23,000 workers, with the current agreements set to expire September 1. Everything in the CSB's findings on Clairton is a warning of what that contract will mean if it is left in the union bureaucracy's hands.

OSHA's long record at Clairton

OSHA already had a long history at Clairton and was well aware of serious hazards involving the plant's coke oven gas system.

Following the 2010 explosion, the agency cited US Steel and reached a settlement in 2012 requiring procedures for controlling, isolating and purging coke oven gas. The CSB's final report found that both the 2010 and 2025 explosions involved maintenance on operating coke oven gas processes that had not been adequately isolated from hazardous energy.

Proper isolation was directly connected to production. Three days after the 2025 explosion, a Clairton worker told the WSWS that the piping should have been isolated and the explosive gas purged with nitrogen before work proceeded. US Steel, he said, "didn't want to shut it down for 12 or 15 hours to do a proper purge."

The CSB substantiates the central point. Coke oven residue sometimes prevented isolation valves from completely closing. Purges then had to be extended or canceled, causing "delays in production or delays in maintenance activities." High-pressure water came to be used to clean the valve seats so they would close and a purge could proceed. US Steel management knew of and endorsed the practice but never developed a safe written procedure or adequately analyzed its hazards.

On the day of the explosion, a US Steel supervisor instructed workers to carry out the water washing operation. That management-directed operation was underway when the Battery 13 valve ruptured, causing the explosion that killed Quinn and Menefee.

In 2013, OSHA formally rescinded the 1992 interpretation US Steel had relied upon to claim its coke oven gas system was exempt from the Process Safety Management standard. For covered processes, the standard requires facility siting to be considered in Process Hazard Analyses.

The CSB concluded that the standard appears to apply at Clairton and that, if so, US Steel should have addressed facility siting beginning in 2013. Yet the company continued relying on OSHA's rescinded interpretation, and even Clairton's Process Safety Management manager was unaware OSHA had changed its position.

OSHA records show that federal inspectors repeatedly returned to Clairton afterward, including to the coke batteries themselves. Yet there is no indication in the public enforcement record that US Steel was cited for Process Safety Management violations involving its coke oven gas system until after Menefee and Quinn were killed. Only then did OSHA propose penalties totaling just $118,214, which US Steel has contested.

The failure at Clairton developed over successive Democratic and Republican administrations as workplace safety was increasingly subordinated to corporate interests.

Under Barack Obama, OSHA rescinded the interpretation US Steel had relied upon. But the administration's broader regulatory policy required agencies to weigh the benefits of regulations against costs, economic growth and competitiveness, and to select the "least burdensome" means of achieving regulatory goals.

Trump made the pro-corporate logic explicit, ordering agencies during his first administration to eliminate two regulations for every new one issued. Biden revoked the order and claimed to restore workplace protections, but for four years OSHA still did not require US Steel to address the Clairton siting hazard.

Trump's return brought an even broader attack, with agencies ordered to identify at least 10 regulations or guidance documents for elimination for every new one issued. His administration also sought to eliminate funding for the CSB, the agency whose report now documents how the Clairton deaths could have been prevented.

Yet the federal government showed an entirely different degree of determination when ownership of US Steel was declared a matter of "national security."

Biden blocked Nippon Steel's acquisition in January 2025. Trump, who had also opposed the takeover during the campaign, ordered another federal review and ultimately approved it under a National Security Agreement giving Washington extraordinary authority over specified US Steel decisions. The takeover closed less than two months before the Clairton explosion.

Presidents, cabinet officials and the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States were mobilized to determine who would own US Steel and how the corporation would serve the strategic interests of American capitalism. Yet for more than a decade the government failed to ensure that Clairton workers were protected from hazards capable of killing them.

The USW bureaucracy: a partner in the cover-up

Every element of the Clairton disaster exposes not only OSHA but the United Steelworkers bureaucracy, which has functioned for decades as a mechanism for suppressing rank-and-file opposition rather than a force fighting for workers' lives.

The USW maintains joint labor-management safety committees at Clairton and every unionized US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs facility. These committees, built on the premise that the union and the company share a common interest in "safety," gave the USW bureaucracy full knowledge of the unrepaired hazards, the unwritten water-washing procedure and the unresolved facility-siting question for years. At no point did the union mobilize its membership, authorize safety strikes, or make public the dangers its own representatives were aware of. Instead, safety was handled the way concessions have always been handled: behind closed doors, through joint committees insulated from any accountability to the membership.

Rather than mobilizing workers to force US Steel to eliminate the dangers at Clairton, the bureaucracy has tied steelworkers' interests to the profitability and strategic interests of the American steel industry. This was expressed most clearly during the fight over Nippon Steel. The USW demanded that US Steel remain "domestically owned and operated," praised Biden when he blocked the acquisition and praised Trump when he pledged to do the same. The union declared that foreign ownership threatened US "economic and national security" and argued that domestic steel production was essential to critical infrastructure and the military.

The same nationalism underlies the USW's support for tariffs and trade-war measures. In 2025, the union welcomed Trump's steel tariffs as a means of combating China and protecting an industry it called the backbone of US "critical infrastructure and national security."

This perspective identifies workers' interests with those of "their" corporation and national government. Instead of mobilizing steelworkers internationally against the corporations, the USW tells workers that their future depends upon strengthening US Steel, defending American manufacturing and increasing US competitiveness and military power. Once workers are told their jobs depend upon the profitability and competitiveness of "their" company, demands that interfere with production—from higher wages to shutting down dangerous equipment—are presented as threats to the industry workers are supposed to defend.

Another sellout is being prepared

This is the same bureaucracy now negotiating the future of 23,000 US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs workers, with the current contracts set to expire September 1. Master bargaining opened July 20, and US Steel has already shown its hand: a five-year wage proposal it promoted publicly while concealing, until a follow-up meeting, a plan to shift major medical, drug and vision costs onto workers and their families. The USW's own bargaining update accused the company of deliberately hiding the healthcare takeaways behind the wage numbers.

At Cleveland-Cliffs, the union says safety remains "one of our top priorities" in the talks, but economic issues, including wages, have not even been raised. On both sides of the table, the pattern is the same one that produced Clairton: safety issues are managed through joint committees and closed-door "updates" to the membership, while the fundamental question of who controls production and who controls safety on the shop floor is never put to a vote of the rank and file.

There is every reason to expect this pattern to continue. Since the 1973 Experimental Negotiating Agreement, the USW bureaucracy has offered labor peace in exchange for concessions, using the excuse of protecting "American" steel to justify decades of falling real wages, gutted pensions and unsafe conditions. Earlier this year, the same apparatus pushed through a four-year national pattern agreement for 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers with raises that failed to keep pace with inflation, a signing bonus in place of real gains, and no cost-of-living protection. There is no reason to expect a different outcome at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs unless workers themselves intervene.

For rank-and-file control over workplace safety

The industrial carnage continues. In little more than a month, two more workers have been killed at major US steel plants. On July 11, 62-year-old electrician Mitcheal Nelson was electrocuted at US Steel's Granite City Works in Illinois while attempting to shut off a malfunctioning transformer. On August 13, 28-year-old Phoenix Services contractor Jonathan Stepp was killed while operating a pot hauler at Cleveland-Cliffs' Burns Harbor Works in Indiana.

These four deaths—Steven Menefee, Timothy Quinn, Mitcheal Nelson and Jonathan Stepp—did not happen in a vacuum. They are the direct product of a system in which corporate management dictates production quotas, OSHA looks the other way for a decade at a time, and the USW bureaucracy sits on joint safety committees that produce no accountability and no action. Workers cannot wait for the next CSB report, issued years after the fact, to learn how their coworkers were killed and who is responsible. Rank-and-file committees must launch their own independent investigation into all four deaths, with full subpoena-equivalent power exercised through mass mobilization: demanding every maintenance record, every Process Hazard Analysis, every internal safety study and every email in which management or the union bureaucracy weighed safety against production, and naming everyone responsible, on both sides of the table, for the decisions that killed these workers.

With contracts expiring September 1 at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs, rank-and-file workers face a decisive test. The USW bureaucracy will present whatever deal it reaches as a victory, exactly as it did with the oil workers' contract earlier this year. Workers cannot accept another agreement negotiated in secret and designed to protect the financial interests of the corporations and the privileges of the union apparatus. Steelworkers should reject any contract that does not reverse decades of concessions, and they should prepare now, independently of the bureaucracy, for joint strike action across US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs to win it.

Rank-and-file committees, independent of the USW apparatus, must be built in every plant and mine to:

• Reject any contract negotiated behind closed doors and demand full membership control over bargaining demands and ratification;

• Prepare and coordinate joint strike action across US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs to recover decades of lost wages, gutted pensions and other concessions handed to the companies by the bureaucracy;

• Abolish the joint USW-management safety committees, which function to manage and conceal hazards on behalf of the corporations rather than eliminate them, and replace them with safety committees controlled by and accountable only to workers;

• Establish workers' control over production quotas and health and safety decisions, including the unconditional right to stop production when dangerous conditions exist, without retaliation or loss of pay, and full access to OSHA inspections, maintenance records, Process Hazard Analyses and internal safety studies;

• Launch an independent rank-and-file investigation into the deaths of Menefee, Quinn, Nelson and Stepp, and hold accountable everyone responsible for their deaths, in management and in the union bureaucracy alike.

Such committees, linked through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, would unite workers across plants and national borders. American steelworkers have no interest in competing against workers in Japan, China, Canada, Mexico or anywhere else for the benefit of US Steel, Cleveland-Cliffs or Nippon Steel. Their common interest is in fighting the corporations' drive for greater production and lower costs at workers' expense—and in wresting control over their safety and their livelihoods away from a bureaucracy that has shown, at Clairton and everywhere else, that it will not do so on their behalf.