

As deaths mount in steel mills, United Steelworkers bureaucrats attend “safety” conference at companies’ expense

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The contracts for around 23,000 steelworkers at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs expired on September 1, but the United Steelworkers have kept them on the job, first on a 30-day extension and then on continuous 48-hour extensions.

The bureaucracy is holding workers back from a struggle even as companies demand huge givebacks. Cleveland-Cliffs has sought monthly healthcare premiums, higher deductibles, an increase in workers’ coinsurance from 10 to 20 percent and the elimination of incentive plans. U.S. Steel’s September 30 proposal included doubled deductibles, higher copays and compulsory use of vacation during family and medical leave. The company’s last publicly posted offer, dated October 9, advertised a pathetic 19.3 percent compounded wage increase over five years. It submitted another offer October 20, whose full terms remain unpublished.

At Cliffs’ Stelco subsidiary in Hamilton, Ontario, layoffs have begun as management idles cold-rolled and coated finishing operations. Roughly 350 production workers face job losses, with the total potentially reaching 500. The USW backed Cliffs’ 2024 takeover, complete with employment assurances to the Canadian government. Workers can keep those assurances with their layoff notices.

Yet in the midst of all of this, and with a bargaining recess until October 28, many USW officials last week joined management in a quarterly safety conference in Ohio, with travel, expenses and earnings paid by management under the labor agreement.

“We’ve made important gains on health and safety ... this conference gives us another opportunity to build on our progress,” the USW declared in a statement reported by the *Mesabi Tribune*.

But less than three weeks earlier, on September 27, machinery at Cliffs’ Monessen coke plant killed Jeffrey Smith, 53. On October 9, Henry Antonio Marmol Martinez, 52, was crushed to death at McWane Ductile in Phillipsburg, New Jersey. In August 2025, Timothy Quinn and Steven Menefee

died in a catastrophic explosion at US Steel’s Clairton Coke Works in Pennsylvania, where investigators subsequently documented years of unsafe practices and inadequate training.

Earlier editions show the character of these gatherings. Cliffs’ 2024 sustainability report described approximately 180 company and union participants reviewing corporate safety statistics, attending training breakouts and hearing a keynote on leadership and safety. There was also a safety expo. Vendors have been invited to market products at the conferences: Cliffs employee Jawan A. Smith shared a vendor-registration invitation on LinkedIn. An exhibitor list for the October 2026 meeting has not been published.

The USW already announced tentative agreements with Cliffs on safety and training on September 12, claiming, among other things, stronger company training obligations, but supplied no agreed clauses.

What this means is not stronger protections against management abuse, but a strengthening of the “labor-management” safety and training framework which finances paid union assignments and gives the apparatus a direct role in administering millions of dollars in company-funded programs.

This is one mechanism giving the bureaucracy a material stake lining up with management against the workers. The contracts the USW keeps extending maintain these channels of corporate funding.

Against this, workers need to take control of the contract struggle through organizations independent of, and opposed to, both management and the union apparatus bound to it.

Cleveland-Cliffs’ USW agreement requires the company to pay union safety committee members’ travel costs, other expenses and earnings for these meetings.

These meetings fall under Article Three, Section H(11), of Cliffs’ 2022 steelmaking agreement. A separate provision, Article Six, Section C, creates 12 “contract coordinators,” selected by the USW negotiating committee chair, who then are responsible for “monitoring” joint undertakings and visiting plants. Cliffs pays the wages and benefits they would otherwise earn, plus approved airfare, hotels and per diems against

supporting vouchers.

U.S. Steel's Article Six, Section C, provides up to 25 full-time coordinators selected and directed by the USW negotiating chair: nine for safety, nine for training and seven for joint efforts. Their duties include monitoring programs and liaising with local officials and management. Weekly compensation includes 40 hours at the labor grade five base rate plus 13 hours at overtime rates, before benefits.

At the agreement's final grade-five rate of \$38.39 an hour, that formula annualizes to about \$118,779 per coordinator, assuming 52 weeks and time-and-a-half overtime. Filling all 25 coordinator positions would mean approximately \$2.97 million in wages alone, before benefits and expenses. Appendix Q-6 separately specifies 15 full-time more safety committee posts paid by the company; their compensation comes on top of that sum.

Cliffs' Article Seven, Section A, establishes plant committees with three union and three company representatives. Each has a full-time training coordinator, jointly selected by the USW negotiating chair and the company's vice president of labor relations. U.S. Steel's Article Seven establishes a comparable structure, meeting at least monthly with company-paid time and expenses.

On top of "safety," there is the Institute for Career Development (ICD), established in Article Seven, Section B, of both agreements. Its courses develop portable skills, from GED preparation and computer training to college study and technical qualifications. Members ordinarily attend on their own time. Local joint committees decide staffing, budgets and courses and may employ coordinators; educational providers receive payment for teaching. ICD describes a network of 58 locations across 13 participating companies.

The agreements finance the company-specific institutes at 15 cents per covered hour worked. The USW-USS Institute for Career Development Trust's 2025 IRS return, available through ProPublica, reports \$3.1 million in contributions and \$2,890,694 in expenses. Its spending includes roughly \$804,000 for outside services.

It should be noted that similar joint training centers were central to a massive bribery and embezzlement scandal in the auto industry. In 2021, Fiat Chrysler (now Stellantis) admitted making more than \$3.5 million in illegal payments to UAW officials through its jointly administered National Training Center. Training-center credit cards financed lavish meals, parties and personal purchases; the scheme also paid off a union vice president's mortgage.

A separate stream finances joint political activity. Article Six, Section B, establishes public-policy funds accruing 12 cents per eligible ton of third-party steel shipments. Eight million qualifying tons would produce \$960,000 a year. Union and company representatives jointly govern the funds, whose subjects include trade and healthcare policy. The same section commits the parties to Stand Up For Steel, an industry-wide

labor-management organization campaigning against allegedly unfair foreign competition. The apparatus falsely promotes the steelmakers' commercial interests as the common interests of workers and employers, even while imposing their dictates inside the plants.

These schemes have nothing to do with safety and everything to do with deepening the bureaucracy's financial and organizational alignment with management. Clairton illustrates what this means for safety. According to the contract, the facility has five full-time company-paid safety committee members there, monthly committee meetings, weekly meetings between the union chair and safety manager, minutes and written management responses.

The CSB's final report (Chemical Safety Board) shows that for at least three years before the 2025 fatal explosion, workers washed gas valves with pressurized water without a written procedure or adequate training. The valve body that ruptured causing the explosion, dated from 1953. The elaborate joint safety structure had left these practices in place. Meanwhile, workers reported six-day, 12-hour repair schedules.

After the explosion, the USW joined the company investigation. Local vice president Richard Tikey defended the equipment and attributed the rupture to contractors. Critical dangers remain even after the disaster: in December, the CSB warned that damaged gas piping had been rebuilt in almost the same layout and that moving control rooms about 100 feet, without a siting study, might leave workers exposed to another disaster.

The bureaucracy functions as a labor police force, enforcing continued production while containing opposition to concessions, layoffs and unsafe conditions. They are hostile to the workers because their material interests run directly counter to the workers they claim to represent.

Steelworkers must build rank-and-file committees at every mill and mine to take bargaining and safety into their own hands. These committees should demand publication of every proposal and tentative agreement, organize independent investigations of fatalities and prepare coordinated strike action.



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