

Contract worker killed at US Steel mill in Pittsburgh

By Evan Winters
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Contract worker Parrish Sewell, 44, of East McKeesport, was killed at the US Steel Edgar Thomson Plant Wednesday night in Braddock, Pennsylvania, five miles from Pittsburgh. Parrish, an employee of the Braddock-based Whistler Construction Inc., reportedly fell over 40 feet to his death while performing planned maintenance in a part of the plant used in the basic oxygen steelmaking process.

The US Occupational Health and Safety Organization (OSHA) announced an inquiry into Sewell's death, which could take up to six months according to area OSHA director Chris Robinson.

Sewell's death comes just two weeks after the labor agreements covering 30,000 US Steel and ArcelorMittal workers expired on September 1. The United Steelworkers union (USW) has ordered its members to continue working even as it acknowledges that both companies are intransigent in their demands for deep concessions. US Steel is demanding concessions in health care, overtime, vacation, and contracting out language. The USW reports that ArcelorMittal has walked out of negotiations.

Steel companies rely increasingly on outside contracting firms for maintenance and other work. Contractors act as an effective second tier of employees. With no benefits or job security, contractors are completely at the mercy of employers.

The companies are able to rely heavily on outside contractors due to decades of betrayals carried out by the USW and other unions, which gave away previous stricter contracting provisions in the name of improving the competitiveness of the steel companies.

The actions of US Steel and ArcelorMittal are of a piece with Pittsburgh-based specialty steelmaker Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI). On August 14, ATI announced the lockout of 2,200 steelworkers, only

days after issuing its "last, best, and final offer" contract. One of the key demands in ATI's proposed contract is to replace so-called "non-core" steelworkers with outside contractors. Such workers who do not directly produce steel make up roughly 40 percent of the total workforce.

In preparation for the lockout, ATI built up a large stockpile of steel by imposing large amounts overtime. Locked out steelworkers report repeated 70-80-hour weeks, with one steelworker working 4,000 hours last year, double the standard work year. Like ATI, US Steel and ArcelorMittal are working feverishly to produce a large stockpile of steel to be well positioned for a lockout. Fatigue from overwork is often a factor in workplace accidents like Sewell's death.

At the time of this writing, the USW has made no statement regarding Sewell's death. Instead, the USW continues to order 30,000 steelworkers to continue building stockpiles for US Steel and ArcelorMittal, allowing the companies to lock them out at their convenience.

Locked out workers also face threats of violence by scabs. In one instance a truck driver reportedly brandished a gun and aimed it at an ATI picket line. Workers have been hit by strikebreaking vehicles at least three times. One worker's foot was run over while another worker was hit by a side rear-view mirror.

James F. Dietz, 61, was struck by a van carrying scabs out of ATI's Brackenridge facility on August 29. Instead of arresting the driver, the police cited the locked-out worker for "intentionally and recklessly" obstructing a public passage, and placing "himself and others in danger of bodily injury."

If a district judge upholds this citation, Dietz could be fined and could face disciplinary action at ATI. In other

words, effective picketing has essentially been outlawed, and scab drivers have a green light to physically attack picketing workers who refuse to step aside.

Steelworkers should take Sewell's death as a warning. US Steel, ATI, and the other steel companies will continue to ruthlessly fight for their interests, even if it means workers are injured or killed. The USW will not defend their interests. It is fully committed to maintaining the profitability of these companies at the expense of the workers. Workers must take conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the USW throughout the building of rank-and-file committees to unite all steelworkers, and other sections of embattled workers, in a common fight.

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