

Death at Decatur tubing plant highlights unsafe working conditions in Alabama

By Shelley Connor
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Tim Cooper, a worker in Decatur, Alabama, died on the job on October 29 after being crushed by a 6,000-pound steel coil—the latest of many industrial accidents caused by hazardous working conditions in the state and nationwide.

Cooper, 49, who had worked for Independence Tube since 2010, had been slitting large steel coils into narrower coils early in the morning alongside several co-workers. As he prepared to band one of the coils, it broke from its restraints and fell on him. The plant was shut down to facilitate rescue efforts; paramedics attempted to save his life, but Cooper died at the scene.

OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) is now investigating the incident. Ramona Morris, OSHA area director in Birmingham, Alabama, told reporters, “We have up to six months to complete our investigation, but we try not to take that long to make a determination. With fatalities, we really try to get them as quickly as possible.”

OSHA spokesman Mike D’Aquino stated that the agency would not suspend operations at Independence unless its investigation revealed conditions that “put workers in imminent danger.”

This is not the first time that Independence Tube has had to answer to OSHA for conditions at its Decatur plant. In 2010, the company was fined \$8,775 and made to correct safety violations cited by OSHA following an inspection of the plant. The violations concerned control of hazardous energy—in this case, failure to shut down the power supply to plant equipment during maintenance—and violations of crane safety protocol. The crane protocol violations could have had a direct bearing on Cooper’s deadly accident, though no definitive answers have been given thus far.

In 2013, 4,405 fatal workplace injuries were reported in the US; 66 of those fatal injuries occurred in

Alabama. Crane protocol and control of hazardous energy violations appear frequently on OSHA’s citations in Alabama. Many of those violations are cited after a worker has been permanently disfigured or killed.

On September 29, 2015, Judge John B. Gatto upheld seven OSHA citations against Matsu Alabama, an automotive parts supplier. A temporary worker’s lower right arm, as well as three of the fingers on his left hand, were amputated by the machine press he was operating at Matsu’s Huntsville plant. OSHA had cited Matsu Alabama previously for failing to put adequate guards on the press, as well as for failing to disable the press’s power supply during maintenance. OSHA fined Matsu Alabama \$103,000.

On September 21, 2014, two workers died and another was injured in an explosion at US Steel’s Fairfield, Alabama, plant. US Steel’s management had ordered the workers to open and close a high-pressure furnace valve containing oxygen and hydrated lime while the furnace was running. In the resultant blast, 53-year-old Edward Bryant was killed immediately. Leo Bridges was hospitalized and died of his injuries a few days later. Mac Bedwell sustained severe burns over his entire body and spent months in the hospital; he remains disabled by his injuries. OSHA cited US Steel for willful violation of labor codes after the explosion, issuing a total of seven citations for serious violations. Ramona Morris points to the 2014 explosion as a case of an employer who “chose productivity over safety.”

One former US Steel worker, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that conditions at the Fairfield plant have become increasingly unsafe over the years. The worker, who had worked at the plant since his youth, states that

safety standards have declined since he first began working there three decades ago. He further stated that management consistently blames workers for safety violations and loss of productivity at the plant.

Other workers have complained that requests for updated safety measures at the plant are frequently rebuffed by US Steel management. In addition, workers have been asked to work longer hours to make up for a workforce that, in their opinion, should have been expanded. Instead, US Steel has cut 1,100 jobs at its Fairfield Works. While its employees numbered well over 3,000 at the height of Alabama's steel-producing boom, it will now only employ 300 people.

Inimical forces are arrayed against Alabama's workers. Management not only discourages the reporting of workplace hazards, but frequently demands that workers violate safety codes for the sake of productivity. As manufacturing jobs become more scarce and less secure, workers are forced to work under unreasonably hazardous conditions. They are discouraged from reporting safety violations for fear of losing their jobs.

In the meantime, unions have revealed themselves ever more brazenly as nothing more than the pawns of these companies. In August of this year, as US Steel implemented plans to lay off more than 1,000 Alabama workers and threatened the retirement benefits of many more, the United Steelworkers did little more than crow about "cheap foreign steel." It led no strikes and made only feeble demands on behalf of its members. Conditions are so bad at US Steel's Fairfield plant that the union operates a union-staffed food bank for employees who had been laid off by US Steel.

As for OSHA, its ability to effectively promote and enforce even meager workplace safety protocols is under threat. In June of this year, the US House Appropriations Committee approved \$18 million worth of cuts from OSHA's 2016 budget.

On October 7, the House Workforce Protections Subcommittee grilled OSHA Director Dr. David Michaels. Representatives on the committee attacked OSHA's "heavy-handed" enforcement of safety standards.

Rep. Vicki Hartzler, Republican of Missouri, impugned the agency's whistleblower program. "Would you concede," she asked Dr. Michaels, "that maybe sometimes...somebody got fired for

incompetence or something else, and then they're gonna get back at him, 'Oh, we'll call OSHA, and boy, they'll come in here and get him!'"

Rep. Mike Rogers, Republican of Alabama, who is not a member of the subcommittee, chided the agency for fining an Alabama company for failing to mark the peripheries of a piece of machinery. Dr. Michaels incredulously challenged the figure—\$50,000—that Rogers gave for the citation, at which point Rogers defiantly stated, "If somebody is not injured, and you just find [a violation] in an inspection, give 'em a reasonable amount of time to fix it, and if they fix it, free pass!" One of the agency's most successful education programs, aimed at increasing safety standard compliance in small industries, stands to be eliminated by the Appropriations Committee.

Rogers vowed to do "everything in his power to fix it" so that employers whose violations that had not led to injury would be exempted from fines for those violations.

Independence Tube, which manufactures structural steel tubing, does not have the workforce that US Steel commanded at the height of its operations in Fairfield. The Decatur plant employs fewer than 100 workers. Its brochure boasts of its "Vendor Managed Inventory" and its cost-effective manufacturing processes. While OSHA has not released any reports on the incident that claimed Tim Cooper's life, it is reasonable to ask whether Independence Tube sacrificed his safety for the sake of cutting costs.

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