

Forty-two-year-old steelworker dies at US Steel mill in Granite City, Illinois

By Jessica Goldstein
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A 42-year-old steelworker was killed Sunday morning in an accident at a rail-yard at the US Steel mill in Granite City, Illinois. According to the St. Louis Medical Examiner's office, Timothy Dagon of Granite City, was pronounced dead at 12:31 p.m. Sunday at the St. Louis University Hospital, around two hours after the accident.

The hospital has not yet released a cause of death. The incident is currently under investigation by the Granite City Police Department as well as the Illinois office of the US Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Administration. The plant has reported that it is working closely with the United Steelworkers Union during the investigation process.

US Steel Corporate Communications Manager Erin DiPietro said, "Yesterday [March 5] at approximately 10 a.m. local time, there was an incident at US Steel's Granite City Works in the rail yard area of the plant that resulted in an employee fatality. The employee's family has been notified.

"An investigation into the incident is underway, and we will work closely with the United Steelworkers and relevant government agencies throughout the process. We have also activated our Employee Assistance Program to offer their services to the employee's family and coworkers."

The Granite City plant was shut down in December 2015, but reopened after US Steel decided to bring back workers to operate its hot-strip mill. More than 200 steelworkers returned to work in the mill last month, after about 2,000 workers were laid off during the December 2015 plant shutdown. Dan Simmons, USW Local 1899 President, hailed the re-opening of the plant under dangerous conditions with a bare-bones staff, calling it "good news" and "a step in the right direction."

The mill was reopened following a lawsuit against the company from the USW alleging the "dumping" of Chinese steel onto the US market.

A call by the *World Socialist Web Site* to Simmons seeking more information on the cause Dagon's death was not returned. According to the *Belleville News Democrat*, "The death is at least the third since US Steel purchased Granite City Steel from National Steel out of bankruptcy in 2003. The first took place Feb. 3, 2005 when David M. Prengel, 46, was killed after being hit by a slow-moving train in the rail yard. The other was on Oct. 30, 2011 when Dennis C. Courtaway, 56, of Caseyville, was found at the top of a blast furnace. His death was ruled as a suicide.

Although plant management is reportedly working closely with the union on the investigation of Dagon's death, there is no mention of the death on the union local's Facebook page or website. In the past, collaboration between the steel companies and the USW have resulted in long delays and cover-ups, as was the case in the investigation of the death of steelworker Jonathan Arizzola in October 2016.

Arizzola was an electrician at US Steel's Gary Works and a USW member. He was electrocuted while performing maintenance on a crane at the mill just one and a half months after US Steel laid off all maintenance staff, replacing them with contract workers and forcing non-maintenance staff to take on the work left behind. The cause of his death, though reportedly under investigation by the union, was withheld until January 17, 2017, over three months after the accident.

USW President Leo Gerard has enthusiastically supported Trump's "America First" nationalism and his efforts to repeal trade policies and withdraw the US from existing trade organizations, such as the North

American Free Trade Agreement and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

In an article published Wednesday on the website OurFuture.org titled “Trumping the WTO for Fair Trade,” Gerard wrote in support of Trump’s decision to end US involvement in the WTO, the largest regulator of international trade. Such a measure would be sure to result in a trade war between the US and countries around the world, in the first place Mexico and China. While trade war policies would be implemented to fuel financial speculation and short-term gains for the rich, the international working class will be made to bear the burden of such policies through cuts to jobs, wages, and benefits, and lower standards of living and dangerous working conditions.

The economic nationalism promoted by the unions as the savior of the American working class will in fact result in massive attacks on the living standards and health and safety of workers in the US and internationally. Through its support for Trump’s “America First” program the USW is seeking to deepen its collaboration with the steel bosses in a struggle to increase the “competitiveness” of US industry by slashing costs and driving up productivity. This means an attempt to roll back every gain won by workers over the last 100 years. It means pitting American workers in a fratricidal struggle with their brothers and sisters overseas in a never-ending competition to reduce costs and drive up profits.

The political support being given by the unions to the right-wing policies of the Trump administration will ensure that tragedies such as the deaths of Dagon and Arizzola will continue and accelerate. A precondition for the defense of health and safety and all the past gains of steelworkers is a break with the unions and their nationalist and pro-company program.

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