

Michigan steelworker dies after falling into vat of sulfuric acid

By Shannon Jones
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The horrific death of a 54-year-old steelworker at Michigan Seamless Tube in South Lyon, Michigan, northwest of Detroit, has shaken family and coworkers.

According to South Lyon police, the worker, Daniel Hill, fell into a vat of 160-degree sulfuric acid. The company uses the acid to increase the strength of tubing.

The worker was walking and able to speak when the police arrived. He was put in a shower and washed off before being rushed to the University of Michigan Hospital emergency room in Ann Arbor with burns over 100 percent of his body. He died 11 hours later.

A spokesman for the South Lyon Fire Department told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the victim was fully submerged in the tank of acid when they arrived.

A neighbor quoted by the *Detroit News* said of Hill and his wife Pamela, “They are just very, very nice people. It was really a shock when I heard about it.” Hill had been employed with Seamless Tube since April 2017.

In addition to his wife, Hill is survived by two children and two grandchildren. According to his obituary, he was nicknamed “Moose.” He was reported to be “very generous to everyone he met and a very dedicated, hard worker. He served in the Army in the motor pool and was proud of his service. He loved fishing and boating during his free time and had a passion for animals, especially dogs.”

A community memorial is scheduled for Hill on Saturday and a family gathering will be held Friday.

Initial reports indicated that the company displayed a sign outside the plant reading, “Fooling around on the job is a job for fools.” Later, the sign seemed to have disappeared.

A coworker who pulled Hill out of the vat received burns on his hands. There was no word on the extent of

his injuries. The United Steelworkers, the union at the facility, has not issued a statement on the tragedy.

According to a preliminary report issued by the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA), Hill “was receiving training” at the time of the accident. A full investigation is reportedly underway but may take several weeks or months.

Michigan Seamless Tube makes a wide variety of tubing products for power generation, aircraft, heavy equipment, agriculture and other applications. Its largest market is the oil and gas industry. It employs over 200 and is the largest employer in South Lyon. The company is a subsidiary of Miami-based Optima Specialty Steel, formerly Specialty Steel Works Inc., that filed for bankruptcy in December 2016 due largely to lower revenue related to falling gas prices.

Optima also owns Niagara LaSalle in Hammond, Indiana and Corey Steel in Cicero, Illinois.

At the time of this writing, there was no further information available as to the circumstances of the death or why an inexperienced trainee was working near an open vat of highly dangerous sulfuric acid. Guidelines published by the Centers for Disease Control call for enclosure of areas where sulfuric acid is in use and for the wearing of protective equipment. The CDC rates sulfuric acid as one of the five most hazardous chemicals resulting in workplace injuries in a survey published in 2015.

A safety website consulted by this reporter called sulfuric acid “one of the most dangerous and destructive materials you will experience in the workplace” (safetypartnersltd.com). It noted, “Simply put, if sulfuric acid somehow comes in contact with ANY part of your body, you will experience an accelerated and swift destruction of bodily tissues. This

rapid destruction could very well cause severe burns that would leave you scarred for life, both physically and emotionally. Not only are burns a problem in themselves, but they can later lead to extended issues such as infections and prolonged recovery.”

According to a search of federal OSHA data, there were 14 incidents of serious workplace injuries due to contact with sulfuric acid in 2017, but no fatalities.

Several posts on Facebook in response to the death of Hill related to safety issues at the company. One person wrote, “My husband used to work there and that place isn’t safe at all. I feel bad for him but when a business ignores safety what can you expect ...”

This latest tragedy is not the first safety-related incident at Michigan Seamless Tube. In June 2017, a fire broke out in the hot mill area of the facility caused by the failure of a hydraulic hose. According to firefighters, the initial fire ignited several spot fires in the building and set the roof on fire. About 50 workers present at the time were evacuated from the premises.

In September 2007, Michael Wilson, 26, a worker at Michigan Seamless Tube, died while attempting to repair a machine that had malfunctioned. While he was inside, the machine started up. Wilson suffered fatal head injuries. A coworker managed to escape.

In June 2013, Michigan Seamless Tube was issued total penalties of \$151,000 for MIOSHA safety violations. The citations consisted of two Willful/Serious, two Serious, and one Other-than-Serious violations. The most serious violations included machine guarding and lockout/tagout. The fines were all appealed.

The company received a \$35,000 MIOSHA citation in October 2018 for lack of adequate guarding around machinery. MIOSHA recorded 38 workplace deaths in Michigan in 2018 and 39 in 2017.

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