

Workers blame 25 deaths at Mittal steel plant on lax safety

By Carmiola Ionescu and Jan Pancevski in Galati

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The Romanian steelworks bought by the billionaire Lakshmi Mittal with the backing of Tony Blair is at the centre of a row over the deaths and injuries of hundreds of workers in accidents on the site.

Twenty-five people have been killed and a further 254 injured at the Galati plant in eastern Romania since it was bought in late 2001 by Mr Mittal, the world's largest steel magnate, according to state safety inspectors.

His purchase of the business caused controversy after disclosures that Mr Blair had sent a letter to the Romanian government endorsing the bid after it had succeeded, just weeks after Mr Mittal donated £125,000 to the Labour Party. Last year, Mr Mittal, one of Britain's richest men, donated £2 million to Labour.

Following accidents at the Mittal Steel Galati plant, its management has been accused by trades union representatives of putting employees' lives at risk through lack of attention to safety procedures.

Last month one worker died and three others were injured after being set ablaze at the plant's oxygen unit. The three survivors are still in critical condition, with more than 70 per cent burns. There have been six fatalities at the plant so far this year, state inspectors say.

The company sacked five managers in response to the most recent incident, which it blamed on "safety procedures not being applied". A spokesman said: "We take safety extremely seriously and leadership must be accountable for ensuring that employees follow the safety procedures set out at all times."

The company disputes the inspectors' death and injury figures, but admits that over the same five-year period 17 employees have died from accidents and a further 203 have suffered injuries which prevented them from working.

However, it says it has improved safety since Mr Mittal took over the ailing enterprise from state ownership. A spokesman said: "We have put great emphasis on reducing the injury rates with considerable success. Prior to Mittal Steel's ownership the average number of lost work day injuries per year was 147. In 2005, this had been reduced to 32, an improvement of 79 per cent." The average number of deaths at the plant has also fallen since Mr Mittal took control, she said.

This month Mittal clinched the £18 billion acquisition of the steel giant Arcelor. Arcelor-Mittal will be the largest steel producer in the world and produce three times as much steel as its closest rival.

Meanwhile, in Romania, union officials say that some of those injured have been permanently disabled. Gheorghe Tiber, a lawyer with the Steel Workers Solidarity Union and who worked at the plant for 23 years, is threatening to take the company to court over the latest accident, which he blames on poor management and lack of effort to improve safety conditions.

Mr Tiber, 46, told The Sunday Telegraph: "The workers sign a form saying they have received training after being read the general rules. The Mittal people have made no effort to improve safety."

So far this year, the plant has been fined £30,000 by state inspectors for disregarding safety rules. The deputy head of Romania's state safety inspectorate, Nicolae Dantes Bratu, said: "The fines have been given for not regularly checking equipment, for improper technology, for not checking employees' health and for inadequately marking dangerous areas."

He said two inspectors had been monitoring the company, though he added: "It is the workers' fault as well. They do not know about their right to refuse to work if they feel they are not protected."

Ilinca Diaconu, 43, who operates the plant's heating system, is paid the equivalent of £110 a month. "When an accident happens all the workers in that unit lose their bonuses," she said. "That way management can save up to £90,000 a month."

"I'm one of the few who will speak up. People are afraid to talk for fear of losing their jobs. This town lives off the plant."

A spokesman for the company said that the accidents had been "unfortunate" but said that claims that the company did not provide health and safety equipment or training were "absolutely false".

"Every employee is given full health and safety training and full safety equipment. There has been no cut back in expenditure in these key areas. Regarding the recent accident in Galati, all the necessary safety procedures were in place, including the protective and testing equipment. The bonus system is an incentive for employees to adhere to the plant's stringent safety procedures."

She dismissed suggestions that the accidents were a consequence of the smaller workforce, which has been reduced from 27,700 to 16,600 since Mr Mittal took over, in an effort to bring the plant more into line with European staffing norms. Some of the injured have been unable to return to work, and in some cases have been awarded compensation by the company.

"Each Mittal Steel business unit has a compensation policy to support any financial losses as a result of

injuries sustained in the workplace," the spokesman said. "In the case of any fatality, support is provided to the family."

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