

Fatal explosion at Ford Rouge plant in Dearborn, Michigan

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A massive explosion and fire ripped through the power station at Ford Motor Company's Rouge River complex in Dearborn, Michigan on Monday afternoon, killing at least one worker and injuring 30 others. With at least two workers still unaccounted for as of Monday night, and many of the injured suffering critical burns over most of their bodies, further loss of life is expected.

The severely burned were transported by helicopter to hospitals in Detroit, Ann Arbor and Toledo, Ohio. Some of the workers were so badly burned they had to be placed inside incubators. Others received head wounds when they were thrown by the blast.

The explosion occurred shortly after 1 p.m. at the Number Three boiler at the power house which generates electricity for the 1,200-acre industrial complex, located about 7 miles outside of Detroit. Witnesses said flames shot up hundreds of feet into the air, and nearby streets were littered with bricks, cinder blocks and debris. One office worker in a building in the giant complex reported that the blast felt like an earthquake, shaking the multistoried building and blowing out windows in cars parked across the street.

About 100 workers were in the power station at the time. One worker, Brian Papke, told reporters, "I thought we were dead because of the way the ceiling and debris fell on us. It was black with smoke and hard to see. I helped one of my coworkers out. He came up to me with his skin burned off and said he was blind." Jerry Sullivan, the president of UAW Local 600, who went to the scene, said, "I haven't seen anything like that since my days in Vietnam."

With the power out Ford management sent the first shift home, and cancelled production at the facility for the afternoon. At the time about 4,000 workers were in the complex, which produces Ford's Mustang model. The Dearborn police cordoned off the area around the plant, concerned that there could be a second explosion.

Soon after the blast a call went out for every available ambulance in the area to rush to the scene, followed by a call for medical helicopters. At one point 75 emergency crews were present. Ambulances lined the streets around the burning building, as heavy gray smoke billowed from the windows. It was well into the evening before the fire was fully extinguished.

The coal-fired station generates enough power to serve a city the size of Boston, according to Ford spokesmen. Workers at the facility, opened shortly after operations at the Rouge complex began in 1918, have long complained about antiquated equipment and dangerous conditions.

In 1989 two maintenance workers were killed by an explosion as they were cleaning a utility tunnel near the power station. The explosion ripped through the half-mile tunnel and ruptured a water main, which led to the drowning of the two men. After canceling the day shift due to a power outage, Ford management, with the support of the UAW, was quick to restore production, despite protests from workers that the asbestos insulation of the tunnel had poisoned the air around the Rouge complex.

On Monday, UAW Local 600 President Sullivan told reporters, "This is an old facility and a very dangerous place to work. There are gas lines, steam lines and high-pressure lines. You have to keep it in tip-top shape to operate." He announced that the union would participate in a joint labor-management investigation along with the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

The present conditions, however, are chiefly the product of the union's collaboration with management. Beginning in the 1970s, the UAW accepted the destruction of the jobs, safety and working conditions of its membership in the name of increasing productivity and strengthening Ford's position against its international and domestic competitors.

With little resistance from the UAW, Ford eliminated

tens of thousands of jobs at the Rouge complex, once the world's largest automotive manufacturing facility. At its peak in the 1940s, 85,000 people worked there. As late as the 1980s, it still employed nearly 20,000. Only about 8,000 workers remain at the six Ford and outside supplier factories that are still in operation.

The world's second largest automobile company made \$6.6 billion last year. With cash reserves of \$23.8 billion, Ford recently bought the car operations of Volvo AB of Sweden for \$6.45 billion, and is looking for other companies to acquire.

A skilled tradesman who works in the power plant told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Men are dead and as far as I'm concerned it did not have to happen. Any time you have an explosion like this, there is a safety breach. In my view, there is not enough money spent on maintenance and safety considering the conditions we work under.

"I came from the chemical environment where I took my apprenticeship and hired into Fords about nine years ago. When you are dealing with natural gas, nitrogen or any type of volatile material the company has various safety measures in place. My question is whether or not they were enforced. With the type of explosion that took place, gas was involved.

"The boiler the men were working on was turned off, and in my opinion gas must have been released when they cut into a line, and this wouldn't have happened if certain procedures were followed. In my opinion, this was a gas explosion. We will follow very carefully any investigation that is done, but I must admit a certain skepticism. The men and I comment all the time about the fact that the union is being paid by the company as well as collecting our dues. Everything is presented as a joint project between the UAW and Ford Motor Company. My feeling is that the union should only be paid by the workers, because then we contract them to work in our interests. If they receive money from the company, they will help cover certain things up."



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