Day after explosion at Ford Rouge plant in Michigan

Auto workers raise concerns that fatal blast was linked to unsafe conditions

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A sense of shock and sadness spread among auto workers at the giant Ford Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan the day after the huge explosion and fire at the power station killed one worker and critically injured more than a dozen others.

At the United Auto Workers Local 600 union hall Tuesday, hundreds of Ford workers gathered to find out information about their injured comrades and to comfort one another. Outside the hall many workers embraced each other and expressed relief that coworkers and friends had survived the previous day's tragedy.

Donald Harper, 58, was killed in the explosion. A lifelong Ford worker and father of six, Harper died of blunt trauma and severe burns from the blast that shook the power plant a 1 p.m. Monday. The explosion near the Number Six boiler sent a likely mixture of metal shrapnel, gaseous flames and 900-degree steam throughout the area, killing Harper and severely injuring several others.

Witnesses compared the magnitude of the blast at the power plant, which generates enough electricity to serve a mid-sized city, to an earthquake. It took more than four hours for firefighters to contain the blaze that resulted.

Those badly burned were still fighting for their lives as of Tuesday night. After the explosion at least 10 workers with life threatening burns were transferred from area hospitals to burn units in Detroit, Ann Arbor and Toledo, Ohio. Many remained unconscious and on respirators. All of the workers, men between the ages of 29 and 64, suffered burns ranging from 10 percent to 90 percent of their bodies.

Dr. Paul Taheri of the University of Michigan's burn center said that the next 24 to 48 hours were critical for their survival. The victims face the danger of infection and dehydration, and the lack of skin leads to fluid loss, swelling and the painful process of removing blisters and dead skin. In addition, victims of explosions suffer badly seared lungs and breathing passages, the result of inhaling a mix of superheated steam and toxic fumes. Damage to the cell lining in the lungs can prevent the absorption of oxygen into the bloodstream.

Outside the union hall, Terry Cline, a power plant worker, said, "We hit the floor when it exploded. Flames were coming through everywhere. My buddy is in the hospital, blind. When the concussion shook I saw people walking out in flames." He added, "Everybody saw something like this coming. For years the place was going downhill and Ford was planning to replace it."

Dearborn Mayor Michael Guido said investigators had told him they had two theories on the cause of the explosion. He told the *Detroit News*, "The leading theory is that the fuel mix might have been too rich. When they opened it [the number three boiler] to stoke it, oxygen hit the mix, causing the explosion."

The boiler produces high-pressure steam by burning pulverized coal, a highly volatile substance. The second theory, Guido said, was that "a release valve might have blown off," causing pressure to build up and leading to the blast.

On Tuesday many Ford workers expressed concern that unsafe working conditions had led to the disaster. But even before investigators began their work, Ford management and the United Auto Workers insisted that safety was not a factor.

Art Janes, the site manager for the Rouge complex,

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claimed that there was no connection between the age of the 78-year-old power station and the explosion. Ron Gettelfinger, UAW International vice-president, Ford department, praised the company, saying that the power station was among the best run plants in the Ford system. "It was a safe facility, there's no question about that," he told the *Detroit News*. "That's why this is so perplexing to us."

Gettelfinger acknowledged that the UAW and Ford were already discussing how to get the company's operations up and running again. Monday's blast forced the shutdown of the Rouge complex, and the halting of parts shipments from the facility was expected to lead to the shutdown of other Ford plants. With the auto company's stocks falling on Wall Street, both management and the UAW were anxious to restart production as soon as possible.

The UAW, Ford and the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration have announced a joint investigation into the blast. Workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* outside the union hall Tuesday expressed their skepticism of the integrity of such an investigation. In their descriptions of the working conditions at the power plant they presented details undermining the claims of management and union officials.

A power house worker with nine years at the facility, said, "This is an old building and there have been lots of layoffs. Ford is making so much money because they don't replace the guys that retire. They save $75,000 to $100,000 for every man that leaves and is not replaced. There is too much work for the rest to handle.

"And it's all old stuff in there. Sooner or later you are going to have a problem. If you have a galvanized pipe in your home that hasn't been replaced, it's going to spring a leak. The way the company figures it, they were building a new powerhouse anyway, why should they invest any more money into it if it was going to be closed?"

Like other auto workers, he denounced the joint United Auto Workers-Ford Motor Company committees which supposedly ensure safe conditions in the plants. "The joint labor-management committees are a joke," he said. "The safety representatives are always relaxed. When people come to complain about things, the reps say they will get to it when they have a chance. But the powerhouse isn't a bathroom, it's explosive."

As for the joint investigation into the explosion, the worker added, "They won't take this seriously. I figure the real truth will never come out because there are a lot of injured guys and that's a lot of lawsuits they don't want to happen. They'll probably say it was an 'act of God' and we couldn't do anything to prevent it."

Another worker, recently retired from Rouge Steel, said a cover-up of management's responsibility would save Ford millions of dollars in legal payments. "I was in a natural gas explosion at the blast furnace a number of years back. The doctors told me if I had inhaled at the time that I would have been a dead man. I was badly burned and disfigured over most of my body.

"There is a law in Michigan. As long as you get workers' compensation for your injuries, you cannot sue unless you can prove that there was a faulty part involved or negligence by the company. I could not get any money for pain and suffering because there was never an investigation carried out.

"When I hired in in the 1960s there were tens of thousands of workers producing steel at the Rouge. Now there are only a couple thousand, yet the continuous caster is operating 24 hours a day, non-stop, and producing steel every 20 minutes."

The Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (MIOSHA) last inspection of the power plant was in January 1996 after a water pump turbine exploded. The state issued three citations at the time: a training violation; a violation for not following proper procedures; and one for an unidentified control valve. The state closed the file after Ford paid nominal fines and allegedly corrected the violations.

Since the mid-1980s, the number of MIOSHA inspectors and workplace inspections have been drastically cut, as has the amount of fines meted out to employers. Auto workers have a rate of injury and work-related illness that is two and a half times that of the average for workers in the private sector, according to the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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