

Explosion at US auto factory

Former power plant supervisors suspect gas leak in fatal blast at Ford's Rouge plant

Jerry White
4 February 1999

New details concerning Monday's explosion and fire at the Ford Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan emerged Wednesday, as public safety officials and investigators entered the damaged powerhouse and sifted through the charred remains. The blast killed one worker and injured dozens of others, some of whom remain hospitalized in critical condition.

According to Dearborn Police Chief Ronald Deziel, the powerhouse explosion occurred while three maintenance men were working on a boiler. Donald Harper, a 35-year veteran at Ford and a father of six, was killed instantly. He was 58.

The two other workers were critically injured by the mixture of gaseous flames, scorching steam and flying debris. Harper's badly burned body was found near the exit, according to the Dearborn fire chief, who said, "He didn't have a chance."

Other workers suffered injuries ranging from critical burns over most of their bodies to head wounds and smoke inhalation. As of Wednesday 16 workers remained hospitalized, including 15 who are critically injured and are being treated in specialized burn units at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and at hospitals in Detroit and Toledo, Ohio.

Of the nine critically injured workers in Ann Arbor, six underwent emergency surgery Wednesday. Three others were said to have taken a turn for the worse. Doctors have had to combat the threat of infection and swelling that blocks the victims' breathing passages. The loss of bodily fluids, including blood, is being fought with massive transfusions. The University of Michigan hospital has put out a special call for blood donations because its burn patients have required 50 to 60 pints a day.

There has been an outpouring of sympathy for the victims from fellow auto workers and others. Hundreds of volunteers stood in line for hours at the United Auto Workers Local 600 union hall near the Rouge complex Wednesday to donate blood. There has also been a flood of contributions from individuals and small businesses to the families of the victims.

On Wednesday investigators began to examine the site and gather details about the explosion. Because of the structural damage to the powerhouse, built in 1921, access was limited. Much of the roof of the building was destroyed and only metal girders remained. Firefighters involved in the inspections narrowly escaped injury from falling debris.

Police Chief Deziel told the *Detroit News* Tuesday, "It appears the cause of the explosion was a boiler explosion, but that's based on what we know now." He added, "Now the question is why. That's what the investigators will be trying to figure out." Deziel said a massive boiler, known as Number 6, had been completely split open by the force of the blast.

Some in the building at the time said the percussion from the explosion was so strong and the ensuing heat so intense that it kicked off as many as six other blasts at boilers and generators. At the same time, overhead cranes and flaming wire rained down on workers' heads as they scrambled to escape.

Inspectors have raised a number of possible explanations for the cause of the blast. They have speculated that a safety valve failed and the boiler exploded as it became over-pressurized. Another theory is that the volatile mixture of coal dust and natural gas became too rich, and was ignited either by a spark or a sudden rush of oxygen.

In February 1987 an explosion occurred when pulverized coal ignited in an area adjacent to the power station. Two workers were severely burned. A veteran powerhouse worker, Sergio Rosa, 64, told the *Detroit Free Press*, "We could never prove it, but we always believed that somehow there was a gas leak and it got ignited."

State officials confirmed that the coal dust explosion in 1987 was investigated, but said records of any findings were destroyed as a part of the department's "normal purging" of documents.

According to the *Detroit Free Press*, former supervisors at the powerhouse who have spoken to workers injured in Monday's explosion said that the concussive force of the blast made them believe the tragedy was caused by natural gas. The Number 6 boiler had been shut down earlier Monday to prepare for an annual inspection. The shutdown process is supposed to involve specific checks to prevent leaks in the massive pipes leading to the boiler.

Another boiler that was initially thought to be at the center of the blast had been shut down for at least a month and was refired Monday. But according to workers on the scene it had been operating smoothly for eight hours when the explosion occurred, leading them to believe that it was not the source of the blast.

Rosa, who retired as the superintendent in charge of the powerhouse last year after 44 years with Ford, said he was told the gas lines to a boiler were being secured for leaks when the explosion occurred. "Number 6 was being taken down for inspection," Rosa said he was told by his former employees. "They were securing all the gas lines. Somehow, around that time, it let go."

Rosa's former general foreman at the powerhouse, Al Price, said coal explosions don't normally cause the kind of damage that occurred Monday. "It could be anything," he said, "but I have to think gas."

Powerhouse workers have long complained of dangerous working conditions. One concern has been the deterioration of equipment in the 78-year-old building. Another has been the impact of Ford's cost-cutting drive on basic safety procedures and preventative maintenance standards.

One power plant worker who survived the blast spoke to a reporter from the *World Socialist Web Site* about conditions there. "You have a lot of old equipment in there," he said. "The place was built in 1921."

He continued, "What's the impact of downsizing? Ford Motor Company is not replacing retired workers. One worker in the basement at the power plant was doing three men's jobs. How could he keep up with the checks that he has to do?"

This article is also available in PDF format



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact