

Ford resuming production following fatal explosion at Michigan plant

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In statements at a press conference Wednesday and through their actions over the past four days, spokesmen for Ford Motor Co. and the United Auto Workers have made it clear that their principal concern in the wake of the February 1 explosion at the Rouge power plant is to insure the most rapid possible resumption of production.

Art Janes, the site manager at the Dearborn, Michigan complex, told reporters at the press conference that the company was working to have full production at all units by Monday, February 8. UAW Local 600 President Jerry Sullivan, also attending the press conference, endorsed the company's plans.

The questions raised by media representatives showed that they too were mainly concerned with how quickly the Rouge complex would resume production. There were very few inquiries on the progress of the investigation into the causes of the blast or the condition of the victims. One worker has died and 16 have suffered life-threatening burn and blast injuries. But for the most part reporters only wanted to know exactly what measures Ford was taking to bring in generators and work with Detroit Edison to get power restored.

The initial human response to the tragedy, which left Ford officials like the new chairman, William Clay Ford III, visibly shaken, was quickly put aside by the company, the media and the union leadership, and replaced by the corporate drive to reassure Wall Street of Ford's determination, with the full collaboration of the UAW, to restart the assembly lines.

Even before state inspectors could begin their investigation in earnest, hundreds of workers from Ford, Rouge Steel, Detroit Edison and the Walbridge Allindger construction company were working to create a nearby substation to connect Edison feeder lines to

Rouge's electrical system. This involves rigging hookups to an underground network which has undoubtedly suffered damage from the explosion, fire, and subsequent power failure.

Under the circumstances, before either the causes or the consequences of the explosion have been determined, there is no way to know what dangers are posed by a restoration of power. Workers involved in installing the substation, erecting utility poles and connecting switch-gear installations are exposed to definite risks. Hundreds of workers are carrying out activity in and around the very same building whose infrastructure was so destroyed by the blast that it will be demolished following the investigation.

Company officials have acknowledged, because the building was constructed in 1921, the danger of asbestos and other hazardous chemicals released in the air which can lead to lung cancer, asbestosis and mesothelioma. The Michigan Department of Consumer and Industry Services has sent two crews to the site to examine the boiler and address the issues of worker safety.

UAW Local 600 officials, in keeping with the union's corporatist policy of identifying the workers' interests with those of the company, have denied that an independent investigation of the disaster is necessary. They are fully satisfied with a probe run by the company, in collaboration with the Ford-controlled Dearborn city government and state agencies under the direction of Republican Governor John Engler.

However, the dispatch of utility crews into the powerhouse and its impending demolition raise the following questions: Will not the work to restart production at the Rouge plant disturb or destroy evidence and undermine efforts to determine the cause of the explosion? Once the report on the disaster is

issued by a joint committee of the Michigan Occupational Health and Safety Administration (MIOSHA), Ford management and the UAW, and the power plant is razed, will that not destroy any evidence which could be used to challenge the findings of the pro-company investigation?

The corporation is being driven by the fact that production units at the giant Rouge complex supply parts for most Ford vehicles. It appeared that the main purpose of Wednesday's press conference was to reassure the company's major shareholders that management would quickly overcome the disruption and get production up and running again. Ford's stock price, which had fallen during the two days since the explosion, rose slightly.

If the shutdown at Rouge were to continue, it could lead to as many as 16 of Ford's 20 North American assembly plants slowing production or closing because of shortages of gasoline tanks, fenders, engines, windows and other parts produced in Dearborn. Ford has already slowed production at nine assembly plants in Ontario, Michigan, Ohio, Missouri and Virginia, including five that produce its highly profitable pickup trucks. As many as 46,000 workers could be affected. In addition, Ford dealers only have a 54-day supply of Ford's hot-selling Mustangs, which are produced at the Rouge assembly plant.

Wall Street analysts estimate the temporary shutdown is costing Rouge Steel \$3 million a day in revenues. In the automobile and steel industries, plagued by overcapacity and fierce competition, lost production can quickly translate into lost sales to foreign and domestic competitors.

In the conflict between resuming production and the need to bring out the truth about this tragedy, it is clear that the consensus of the company, the union and the news media is that profits must come first.



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