Gas buildup blamed for deadly explosion at Michigan power plant

Second Ford Rouge worker dies

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Friday afternoon a second auto worker died from injuries sustained in the massive explosion at the Ford Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan February 1. Cody Boatwright, 51, from Taylor, died at the University of Michigan's trauma burn center in Ann Arbor, after being sustained for days on a ventilator.

Donald Harper, a 58-year-old pipefitter, was killed instantly in Monday's blast. Another 14 critically injured workers remain hospitalized with burns covering 20 to 90 percent of their bodies. The men--ranging in age from 40 to 64--are in danger of infection and face breathing problems. If they survive, they will have to undergo months of painful skin grafts to repair their wounds.

At least one of the most severely injured survivors was put on advanced life support at the U-M Medical Center on Thursday. Because of smoke and heat damage to their lungs, victims are placed on artificial heart-lung machines to allow their lungs to heal and increase oxygen levels in the blood, according to Dr. Paul Taheri, chief of U-M's trauma burn unit. Survival rates for adults using the machine are about 55 percent.

On Thursday a state inspector determined that a gas buildup inside a massive boiler at the electrical power station caused the explosion at the Ford Rouge complex. Consumer and Industry Service inspector Dave Johnson, who examined the remains of the 78-year-old power plant Thursday, termed the blast a "furnace explosion." He said it occurred inside the firebox chamber of the boiler where flames heat water into steam to power the plant's electrical generators.

The agency's spokesperson, Maura Campbell, said, "A lot of other questions are going to take some time to answer, like why was there a buildup of gas in the boiler." Another key question is what ignited the gas, the agency said.

Donald Harper was working on the Number 6 boiler along with other pipefitters, Ron Moritz and Vince Fodera, and boiler room foreman John Sklarczyk, when the blast occurred around 1 p.m. Monday. The force of the blast split open the 60-foot boiler and apparently set off a series of other explosions, sending a concussion blast as well as super-heated water and debris throughout the third floor of the power plant. Harper was killed instantly and the other three men were critically burned. In addition, more than a dozen workers in the nearby control room, lunchroom and floor areas were critically injured.

The boiler that exploded was built in 1965. According to the inspection agency it was one of the newer ones at the Rouge complex, which has some boilers dating from the 1930s. It was last inspected on February 20, 1998, and was due soon for an annual check.

Based on interviews with Ford powerhouse workers, the *Detroit Free Press* presented a scenario of the events. At the time of the explosion the Number 6 boiler was being shut down for inspection, a process that takes several hours. According to Al Price, a retired foreman of the powerhouse, he was told that workers had stopped the boiler from operating and were in the process of completing safety procedures designed to prevent fuel leaks, especially through two large gas pipes leading to the firebox.

In the morning, the men "blanked" the flow of the blast furnace gas, which means they inserted a piece of metal into the pipe, physically preventing the gas from entering the boiler. A valve is used to control the flow, and that is shut off first. But the physical metal barrier was also needed, workers reported, in case the valve does not close properly. After lunch, the men planned to blank the natural gas line.

Somehow unburned gas built up in the firebox and was ignited, causing the blast. Price speculated that a natural gas leak into the furnace must have been ignited by coal embers, rather than an exterior source such as a spark or lighter.

The account in the *Detroit Free Press*, as well as the issues posed by the state inspector, raise the troubling

question: Did the age and condition of the equipment in the 78-year-old plant contribute to the fatal explosion?

A veteran power station worker from General Motors spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* after reading the state inspector's preliminary findings and the accounts in the Detroit newspapers. He said, "Something is not right. This boiler was being cooled down for its annual inspection and there should never have been any gas going into the firebox. It was still hot and somehow natural gas leaked in.

"There is a national code of procedures to close all valves that carry fuel into the firebox whenever the boiler is shut down. Also, by law, there are vents on the fuel lines that allow any remaining fuel to escape through the roof, not travel down to the boiler. The gas should never have reached the boiler. Never.

"I read in the papers that these workers 'blank' the pipes to stop gas from entering the firebox. We don't do that at my plant. No way. We don't need to because the valves shut off the gas. Blanking is an extreme precaution you use only if the valves won't shut off the gas flow. Maybe the valves were old and the men thought the gas might leak by. Maybe the escape vents were plugged.

"There are also what are called Maxon valves, certified by the American Association of Mechanical Engineers, that are hooked to an electrical circuit. When you shut the boiler down, the valves automatically shut and stop the fuel intake. If the water level is low, the valve shuts off. If the oxygen level is low, the valves slam shut. The valves are the most important thing because if you have raw, unburned fuel in the firebox all you need is a little more heat and you get a massive explosion.

"These men were cooling down the boiler. There was no reason for fuel to get into the firebox. This is something that should never happen in a boiler house."