

Death toll mounts in blast at US auto plant

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On Sunday 44-year-old Ken Anderson of Wyandotte, Michigan became the fourth worker to die as a result of the February 1 powerhouse explosion at Ford Motor Company's Rouge complex outside Detroit.

Eleven other workers remain hospitalized at the University of Michigan's burn unit, Detroit Receiving Hospital and St. Vincent Hospital in Toledo, Ohio. Of these, seven are still in critical condition.

A task force consisting of representatives from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Ford Motor Co., the UAW, insurance companies and the Dearborn Fire Department are currently investigating the cause of the blast. A report is expected by the end of the month.

Reports made available to the WSWS by OSHA show a definite pattern of repeated violations of safety and hazardous conditions in every building comprising the 1,100-acre sprawling Rouge facility. However, within a day of the explosion the UAW and Ford said there was no relationship between the blast and cost cutting-measures that have been carried out by the company for the past 10 years.

In the course of the past decade 12 workers, not including those who died in the recent explosion, have been killed at the Dearborn facility. In this same period, the UAW made concessions to the company in exchange for guarantees to maintain production at the Rouge, the future of which was far from certain.

At the power plant, site of the February 1 blast, Ford was cited and fined on March 5, 1996 and again in June 1997, following complaints called in to OSHA for problems with machine controls. During this same period numerous complaints were filed over hazardous conditions in the glass plant, Dearborn Assembly, the tool and die plant, Dearborn Engine and the frame and stamping plants.

Serious violations, those that did or could result in death or serious injury, numbered 155. There were also

72 repeat violations and 200 other citations. Fines issued to the company totaling \$190,275, a paltry sum when compared to Ford's profits, are still being negotiated.

The role of the United Auto Workers leadership at Rouge has been disastrous for workers. Pursuing a policy that identifies the interests of workers with those of Ford Motor Co., union leaders have allowed the deterioration of safety at the Dearborn facility, setting the stage for the fatal explosion.

Workers at the Rouge complex have taken issue with the official position of the UAW that the explosion was just an "unfortunate accident." The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers outside the Dearborn Assembly plant, which is located approximately 200 yards from where the blast took place. Physically shaken by the tragedy, they expressed bitterness toward Ford Motor Co. and the United Auto Workers.

"There have been other times when accidents have happened, people have been killed, and production continued," one worker commented. "Ford is mainly interested in production. Ford says it is for teamwork, but the team concept really means you do all of the work and the company reaps the profits."

During a planned inspection of the assembly plant on May 28, 1991, Ford was cited for two serious violations, 10 repeat violations and 17 others. These included exposed live wires, inadequate air pressure, no guards for open-sided floors, platforms and runways and broken equipment.

When questioned why the company did not carry out the necessary repairs, a worker explained, "It's because of cost cutting. You go to the union, they say 'we're going to do this,' but nothing ever happens. People say we don't have a union. You put new personnel in there, but it still seems like nothing is done. It is the company that runs the show."

A black coworker added, "It is well known that the

UAW works for the company. We have a name for this place. We call it the 'Big Plantation.' And the biggest overseers are black union officials."

On December 15, 1995, Burl Williams, a worker with just a few years to retirement was crushed to death at the stamping plant by a power press fitted with the wrong sized hinges. The fine issued to the company was a mere \$6,000, and has remain unpaid until this day.

John, who witnessed the accident, explained, "When they take shortcuts--and believe me, there are many--it's like gambling. You keep feeding that machine money hoping to hit the big one. But here we are dealing with workers' lives, not with just losing some cash. They are not spending the money necessary to maintain all the equipment and instead they keep their fingers crossed hoping that nothing will happen.

"Let's take the way the accident happened in my plant. In most of the facilities you have three shifts. In the stamping plant there are massive machines weighing thousands of pounds. Because of the pressure to keep production going there is as little down-time as possible. When machines need work they are taken down by the day shift, worked on by the afternoon shift and put back up by the evening shift. In the morning the supervisor gives a green light that it's okay. On the day Williams died I had actually pushed the machine down the line and the entire piece came down on top of him. Apparently the hinges used were not correct. I still get visions of what was the most horrible thing I have ever seen in my life.

"These things should never happen. After the investigation, the foreman was made to retire with nothing else being done. In other words, he was used as a scapegoat and no other issues were addressed. The union never called a meeting or issued its own report on the tragedy. OSHA came in, the news came in and then things were quiet. There was no discussion after the event happened. Most of the buildings at Rouge were built in the beginning of this century, and in my view a lot of the equipment in there is antique and should be in a museum. Even before I got hired in 30 years ago, they should have gotten rid of it.

"All my life--and I am now 56--I have not seen much change in the conditions of the working man. It used to be that you could inch your way up and do better than your parents, but today my two boys are doing worse

than I am. They are working to eliminate that middle class and only have the poor and the rich. They tell us that poor people are happy and when you die, you'll go to heaven. Well, I don't know, it's pretty much like hell now. Those men with terrible burns from the accident will suffer for the rest of their living lives."

Reports of the tragedy have virtually disappeared from the local newspapers, replaced by news of efforts by Ford Motor Co. to get things back to normal. But for the families who are maintaining daily vigils at hospitals, or had to bury their loved ones, things will never be the same.



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