The explosion at the Ford Rouge plant

How union-management collaboration has undermined workers' safety in the US auto industry

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The tragic fallout from the February 1 explosion at the Ford Rouge power plant in Dearborn, Michigan continues. Over the past several days Warren Blow and Ken Anderson, two of four workers who succumbed to injuries sustained in the blast, were buried.

Family, friends and coworkers gathered to pay respects to these men, who died after surviving on life support systems for nearly two weeks. Their thoughts were weighed down as well by the suffering of 11 workers who remain hospitalized. Three of these have reportedly taken a turn for the worse and may be near death.

The deaths of Blow and Anderson were barely noted by the national news media, which all but dropped the story of the explosion once production had been resumed at the Rouge complex.

From the first day of the tragedy the United Auto Workers union has, in advance of any investigation into the blast, gone out of its way to exonerate Ford management. Indeed, barely two weeks after the explosion hundreds of UAW officials gathered with their Ford counterparts for the annual "UAW-Ford leadership conference" at the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim, California, where they discussed how to boost productivity and profits.

The UAW's ostentatious defense of the company is motivated by a desire to cover up not only Ford's role, but its own as well. Over the past two decades the UAW has systematically sacrificed the health and safety of its members to assist the drive of the auto companies to cut costs and boost profits. In the process the UAW has redefined itself as a junior partner of the Big Three automakers.

The united front of union and management against the auto workers is exemplified by the Local Ergonomics Committees (LECs), which were established under a 1990 agreement between Ford and the UAW. The ostensible purpose of the LECs is to improve workplace design and reduce repetitive trauma injuries, chemical exposures and other hazards. In practice, they operate as union-management bodies for subordinating safety and health concerns to the drive for profit.

An August 1993 article in the *Detroit Free Press* entitled "No Pain ... But Plenty to Gain" explained the functioning of the LECs. "When it's seeking to fix a dangerous job, the ergonomics committee at Ford's Michigan Truck Plant in Wayne uses a simple financial calculation.

"First, the committee adds up how much money specific health hazards cost in workers compensation and lost work time. Then, it multiplies that number by four, to reflect the hidden impact of reduced quality and productivity. If that number is more than the cost of the corrective action, the corrective measures are likely to win approval."

This procedure, presented by the *Free Press* as a marvel of efficiency and the overall benefits of union-management harmony, is in reality a damning indictment of the role of the UAW. Every auto worker should stop and consider what is involved here.

Union representatives actually calculate the relative costs to the company of removing hazards that impact the health and safety of the workers, or maintaining the

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unsafe conditions as they are. Only if the company ultimately saves money does the union recommend making the expenditures necessary to protect the workers.

To put this in more human terms, the "cost" of workers losing fingers, hands or other limbs; incurring damage to their lungs or other organs from toxic chemicals; losing partial or full use of their motor functions from repetitive motion injuries; suffering crippling or even fatal heart attacks due to overwork--this is placed on a scale and weighed jointly by union and management against a possible loss in corporate profits. The benefit of the doubt, with the agreement of the union, goes to company's bottom line.

This is, quite simply, direct union complicity in an industrial regime that inflicts entirely avoidable injury and death on the workforce.

The *Free Press* article noted that Ford intended to invest $20 million in fixing ergonomics problems at its 27 body and assembly plants and that it expected these measures to generate $80 million in savings. A major part of such savings come from union-backed efforts to slash the amount paid out in workers compensation. At the Michigan Truck Plant workers compensation costs dropped from $6.6 million in 1991 to $477,000 in 1992.

"These savings are not only attributed to ergonomics," the *Free* Press article continued, "but also to aggressive efforts to place injured workers on alternate jobs." Joint proposals on ergonomics also helped boost productivity. "Workers on the assembly line are working an average of 56.5 seconds out of every minute, and productivity is increasing," the *Free Press* reported.

The *New York Times* recently reported that profits produced at the Michigan Truck Plant are the highest of any owned by Ford, approaching the level of Chrysler Corporation's entire 1997 earnings. In 34 months the truck plant produced sufficient profit to pay for Ford's recent $6.45 billion acquisition of Volvo's car division.

What, therefore, are the relations that exist inside the auto plants? Management defends the interests of the corporate owners and big stockholders, and the union defends management. Nobody defends the workers.

This has a great deal to do with the explosion at Rouge. A powerhouse worker recently told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the piping and valves on the boilers were so old that workers anticipated gas leaks. These dangerous conditions persisted because the replacement of parts came slowly or not at all.

This was confirmed by Jerry Nyland, a boiler operator who suffered burns over 20 percent of his body. Nyland was quoted in the *Detroit Free Press*, saying, "The place was an accident waiting to happen."

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