

The UAW and the Rouge explosion

A pat on the head from the Detroit News

Jerry White
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The United Auto Workers is getting good marks from the business establishment and the media in Detroit for its performance in the aftermath of Monday's fatal explosion at the Ford Rouge plant. The *Detroit News* business writer Jon Pepper went out of his way to give the union officials a pat on the head in his column Wednesday, entitled "UAW applauds Ford as company shows workers it really cares."

Pepper began his article by singling out a question during a joint union-management news conference the day after the blast. "The question at Tuesday's press conference came out of left field," Pepper wrote, "Wasn't the explosion at Ford Motor Co.'s Rouge Plant the result of the company's relentless cost-cutting? Hadn't Ford compromised the safety of its workers in its drive for profits?"

"The emphatic answer from UAW Vice-President Ron Gettelfinger was probably not what the reporter wanted to hear. He insisted the health and safety of Ford's workers was Job 1 for both the company and the union in bargaining talks, in daily factory life, and in the response to the tragedy."

The *Detroit News* columnist is referring to a question posed by this reporter. It is apparent that my query caught company and union officials off guard, and was considered both impudent and threatening. They knew, of course, that neither Pepper nor any of the other reporters from the establishment media would raise the issue.

Rouge workers and others might well ask why the relationship between cost-cutting and safety standards should be described as coming from "left field?" It is a perfectly understandable and logical question, given the fact that Ford has carried out an uninterrupted cost-cutting campaign for two decades, with the full cooperation of the UAW. Over this period independent

union representation on the shop floor has ceased to exist, replaced by a myriad of joint company-union bodies. Among the issues that are subject to such corporatist structures are the health and safety of the workers.

Last year alone, the automaker cut \$2.2 billion from its operating costs, double its goal, and eliminated 9,000 jobs. It stands to reason that these cutbacks, combined with the lack of any independent representation of the workers' interests, contributed to the conditions that led to the explosion. Last Monday's blast, moreover, was the most devastating, but by no means the only fatal accident in recent years.

This reporter and other journalists from the WSWs have spoken with many Rouge workers who strongly believe there is a connection between downsizing, speed-up and last Monday's disaster. What Pepper considers illegitimate is the intrusion of the reality on the shop floor and the feelings of the workers into the stage-managed confines of the press conference.

The *Detroit News* columnist continues, "The exchange did much to demonstrate why Ford has the best labor relations in the business. Good communication and a close working relationship between forces that are inherently antagonistic helped both sides behave at their best in the wake of a tragedy."

Pepper acknowledges that the relationship between the workers and the owners is inherently antagonistic. Given the fact that two workers have perished, others are near death, and still more have had their lives shattered, it would seem that this antagonistic relationship should be taken into account when examining the causes of the tragedy. But what Pepper calls "good behavior" is a carefully scripted effort by management and the union to obscure the existence of

any significant differences between the interests of the workers and those of the bosses.

Pepper is one of the more blunt commentators on labor relations in the auto industry. He has a fairly good grasp of the nature of the relationship between the UAW and the auto companies. In March of 1996, after the UAW had sold out a 17-day strike at GM's Dayton, Ohio brake plant, Pepper wrote a column urging the automaker not to publicly contest the union's claims of victory. Instead, he said, GM "should tell Wall Street the company got what it wanted, but do it quietly. There is no need to provoke the ranks into renewed militancy. That's because GM has the union exactly where it wants: housebroken, but not busted."

Pepper actually speaks for a newspaper that has gone beyond housebreaking its unions. The *News* has, over the past several years, carried out one of the most vicious union-busting operations in the history of the newspaper industry.

Wednesday's column is, in its own way, a reflection of the great concern that exists within the corporate and political establishment that the Rouge disaster could become a focal point for the pent-up anger and frustration of workers who have suffered years of plant closings, layoffs and deteriorating working conditions. They have seen their living standards stagnate or decline, while the auto companies' profits have soared and corporate executives have gorged themselves with multimillion-dollar salaries and bonuses.

A tragedy like the Rouge explosion shakes the edifice of rationalizations and lies that are used to justify the assault on the working class, and prompts more serious thought about society and the position of workers in it. To those on the top, such thoughts are dangerous.

Pepper tacitly acknowledges this when he thanks the UAW officials for "wisely electing not to politicize a situation that could have been easily exploited." He continues: "The union played a key role in helping to calm frayed nerves among workers and in offering its members credible validation that safety was a top priority at Ford."

The *Detroit News* columnist may console himself in the belief that workers take the UAW's word as good coin. In reality, the UAW's response to the explosion further discredits the union and weakens the labor bureaucracy's grip over the working class. The fact that the UAW so closely identifies itself with Ford (or

Ford-UAW, as the company is often called) only means that, in the eyes of an increasing number of workers, it shares the blame for the deadly conditions they face.



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