

Victim of Ford Rouge explosion says power plant was "running on bubble gum and bobby pins"

Jerry White
4 March 1999

Six workers have died thus far from the February 1 explosion at the Ford Rouge plant in Dearborn, Michigan. The vigil of family and friends is continuing at area burn centers for the six workers who remain hospitalized a month after the disaster, some with life-threatening injuries.

John Sklarczyk, 47, and Vincent Fodera, 46, are in critical condition at St. Vincent's Hospital in Toledo, Ohio and Detroit Receiving Hospital, respectively. Gerald Moore, 55, is in serious condition and Dennis Arrington, 47, is listed as fair. John Kucharski, 40, has been upgraded to good condition. The family of Chris Getts, 46, hospitalized at the University of Michigan Burn Center, has requested that no information be made public about his condition.

The workers who have been released from the hospitals await a long and painful recovery from burns and other injuries. Under Michigan's workers' compensation law only their medical bills and a portion of their lost wages will be paid. The workers cannot sue Ford Motor Co.

Although officials from state and federal safety agencies, the Ford Motor Company and the UAW, involved in a joint investigation, said a report on the causes of the fatal blast would be ready in a month, no report has been issued to date.

One of the workers recently released from the hospital told a local newspaper that the power house where the explosion occurred was hazardous. "I've always said to [my wife] that the place was an accident waiting to happen," Gerald Nyland, a boiler operator with 26 years at Ford, told the *Detroit Free Press*. He told the newspaper that when Ford and the United Auto Workers announced last fall that a new power plant

would be built to replace the 78-year-old facility most of the men cheered. But others were worried, including Nyland: "I knew it'd be running on bubble gum and bobby pins" until its retirement, Nyland said. "I knew they'd only fix what they had to fix to keep it running."

Ford officials denied the statements made by Nyland and echoed by many of his coworkers. Spokesman Nick Sharkey said the plant was "at the highest level of safety possible for our workers." UAW officials have gone out of their way to defend the company's claims and have denied that Ford's cost-cutting and productivity drive have led to an erosion of safety standards.



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