

The Ford Rouge explosion

Family of injured worker gets restraining order to prevent Ford from destroying evidence

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The family of one of the Ford workers severely injured in the February 1 explosion at the Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan, has gone to court to prevent Ford Motor Co. from altering or destroying evidence at the power plant where the fatal blast occurred.

On February 23 a Wayne County Circuit judge granted the family of Chris Getts a temporary restraining order preventing entry into the site. The judge later modified his ruling placing Dearborn Fire Marshal Richard Polcyn in control of the evidence and allowing him to continue the investigation into the causes of the explosion.

The blast was the deadliest accident at an auto factory in the last half century. Six workers were killed and six remain hospitalized, at least one with life threatening injuries. Getts, 46, of Livonia suffered burns on two-thirds of his body and is hospitalized at the University of Michigan Burn Center in Ann Arbor.

Within a day of the explosion, before an investigation began, Ford and United Auto Workers officials declared that the blast was not the result of unsafe conditions caused by years of corporate downsizing. Company and union officials continued this claim even as evidence mounted, particularly from survivors of the blast, connecting the explosion to the antiquated and poorly maintained equipment at the 78-year-old power plant.

An official investigation into the causes of the explosion was launched involving local, state and national safety agencies, along with Ford, its insurance companies, and the UAW. However, the overriding

concern of the company and the UAW was to resume production at the Rouge facility and restart the flow of auto parts from the complex to Ford plants throughout the US, whose disruption had already cost the company millions.

Ford then announced that the power plant would be razed as soon as the official investigation was complete. This rush to wrap up the investigation and destroy the plant provoked concerns at the time from Dearborn Fire Chief Jack MacArthur who said, "We are asking everyone involved to proceed with an open mind and reserve judgment until all the evidence is gathered and studied. The working theory remains such catastrophes usually result from a series of system failures."

Getts' family also expressed concern that the razing of power plant would destroy vital evidence and that the official investigation would be a whitewash. The family's attorney, David Christensen, said, "We want to conduct our own investigation in the event something is missed."

Ford spokesman Nick Sharkey defended the company's actions, stating, "All the work at the site is being conducted according to recognized procedures and protocols designed to preserve evidence for proper evaluation. That evidence will be made available to all necessary parties at the appropriate time."

The investigation will continue under the direction of the Dearborn Fire Department, with "input," as the *Detroit Free Press* describes it, from Ford, its insurance companies, the UAW and other agencies. The city of Dearborn, however, can hardly be described as an

neutral entity. Since the days of Henry Ford the auto maker has dominated the city and to this day remains its largest employer.

Investigators who first said a cause would be determined within a month of the blast, now say the one-week delay caused by the judge's restraining order means the inquiry will not be complete until some time in April.

The focus of the investigation remains the valves that controlled the natural gas flow into Boiler #6 which state inspectors say exploded on February 1. A gas buildup inside of the boiler is believed to have ignited, causing the blast.

The control valves, some weighing up to 500 pounds, will be tested, along with fans designed to dissipate unburned gas. Investigators have questioned power plant workers about the valves and a procedure known as blanking where workers inserted a piece of metal into the fuel lines leading into the boiler to prevent the flow of gas. Power house workers conducted this unusual procedure because the valves were so old and were known to have leaked, even after being turned off.

On the day of the explosion Boiler #6 had been shut off for its annual inspection and was cooling down. The workers were in the process of blanking Boiler #6 when it exploded at 1 p.m., most likely because gas continued to flow into the still hot boiler.

A number of workers have said equipment in the power plant was poorly maintained. One worker, who asked not to be identified for fear of losing his job, told the *Detroit Free Press*, "We all knew the valves were leaking. They should have been changed years ago." The pipefitter said workers greased a leaking valve late last year to temporarily prevent seepage.



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