

# Auto workers write to WSWS about fatal explosion at Ford plant

11 March 1999

*The following letters were sent to the World Socialist Web Site about the February 1 explosion at the Ford Rouge complex outside of Detroit.*

Dear Sir,

I just returned from the funeral of Warren Blow. I have been to two funerals in two days. Yesterday I went to Kenny Anderson's funeral. This has been quite an experience for all of us. Now we have the fear there may be more deaths to come. Three men, John Sklarczyk, Vinny Fedora and Ron Moritz are rumored to be near death. Please pray this is not so.

I read your report about blanking the boilers. For us at the Ford powerhouse blanking was a standard and routine procedure due to the fact that the piping and valves were so old and we knew that they leaked. Also we didn't have any vent lines. Venting was done by opening the gas valves and allowing any trapped gas to dissipate into the boiler proper.

The problem on Monday [February 1] stemmed from the fact the job of blanking wasn't finished in the morning. During the lunch break there was time for the gas to accumulate in the gas lines and firebox. Had the workers finished the blanking in one continuous operation and not been interrupted this explosion would have never happened. Shortly after returning from lunch break and commencing work on blanking the natural gas lines to the boiler, the explosion occurred.

Just as an aside, there were two brand new gas shutoff valves on a pallet by the front door of the powerhouse with "Install Me" tags on them.

Regards,

BP

Ford power plant employee

February 18, 1999

Dear WSWS,

In response to the letter from BP, the Ford Power plant employee, I was shocked to learn that blanking

the natural gas line when cooling a boiler and venting gas that leaked through gas valves and piping was common practice on any boiler whether it be a school, hospital, auto plant or utility company.

The state of Michigan does not inspect safe boiler procedures. They require boiler insurance companies to perform annual inspections on all boilers in Michigan (except residential). These companies' findings determine the criteria for Michigan to issue permits to operate safe boilers. Insurance companies require natural gas lines in fuel boilers to be vented to the roof of the building not to a boiler combustion chamber. When a gas fired boiler, (like the #6 boiler at the Ford Rouge plant) is taken off the line it remains hot for many hours, depending on the size. If you vent gas into a hot boiler with temperatures above the flash point of natural gas, you automatically have an explosion.

I need to talk to the power house boiler operators who were there the day of the explosion to be sure of what happened. However, from what I read in the Detroit newspapers, here's what happened: first an explosion and secondly a huge flame. It would seem from this information, that the explosion of the gas in the boiler ruptured the natural gas line leading to the boiler, hence the huge fire outside the boiler.

I have high regards for BP for speaking out on this. I share his grief for the six workers who died thus far, for their loved ones and families, not to mention the victims who are still suffering in the burn centers.

I have been a powerhouse stationary engineer for 25 years and I know to avoid tragedies like this one we must expose the truth about what caused it. I honestly think the only way this will happen is through the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party.

I will do anything in my power to expose the truth behind this tragedy, which, in my opinion, is corporate

murder.

Sincerely yours,

LR

February 26, 1999

Dear Sir,

The priority for the powerhouse is to get the turbo blowers running again for the steelmaking operations to resume. The investigation into the cause of the explosion has taken a backseat to getting production up and running again. This is apparently a business decision on the part of Ford Motor Co. and Rouge Steel industries.

Powerhouse hourly employee,

BP

March 2, 1999

Dear Sir,

To clarify something surrounding the blanking procedure I talked to a pipefitter with some 15 years of powerhouse experience. The upshot of our conversation boiled down to the practices of years past when the men were given incentives in the form of time-and-a-half pay to complete the blanking procedures without interruption. For example the men would be paid 12 hours for an 8 hour job. You have to understand that this job is hot (in the neighborhood of 120 degrees Fahrenheit), so the object is to get in next to the boiler, do the job and get back out. No one wants to go back in a second time if they can help it. The blanking job is dark, dimly lit, hot, sweaty and hard and dirty. So the idea is to go in once and be done.

However in November 1997 Ford management, in one of [Company CEO Jac] Nasser's hatchet jobs, declared there would be no more overtime pay given out to workers in Technical and Transportation department which runs the powerhouse. This was because we were not directly related to automobile production and Ford Motor Company wanted out of the power business. I hope you get the idea! The pipefitters were not going to go the extra mile for the company because the company was squeezing all of the hourly workers in power to create larger bonuses for management and larger dividends for the preferred shareholders. I believe I am not too far off the mark when I say now that GREED killed six of my coworkers and injured many more and put a lot of us into a situation where we caught a brief glimpse of hell.

Thanks for your interest.

Sincerely,

BP

Power Department

Ford Motor Company

March 6, 1999



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**