

An exchange with UAW President Yokich on the Ford Rouge explosion

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18 June 1999

At a press conference June 14 inaugurating the UAW-Big Three auto talks union President Stephen Yokich refused to reveal what union officials knew of workers' complaints about safety violations at Ford's Rouge complex power plant. On February 1 a boiler at the Dearborn, Michigan facility exploded causing the deaths of six workers.

The *Detroit Free Press* recently reported that three of the six men killed had filed safety complaints prior to the blast, and that one of them, John Arseneau, a 45-year-old pipefitter, had specifically warned other workers to "stay away" from Boiler #6, where the explosion occurred.

At the June 14 press conference this reporter posed the following question:

"There have been widespread reports of safety complaints at the Ford Rouge power plant before the explosion. What did the UAW know about unsafe conditions at the power plant, and why did UAW officials such as Ron Gettelfinger exonerate the company, even before an investigation began?"

In his reply the UAW president was clearly anxious to dismiss the question and avoid any public statements. He said:

"We made our remarks about the power plant and the fatalities, not only here at Ford but at Chrysler and GM, across the bargaining table and we will be working on that in this contract. This is what negotiations are about.

"Mr. Gettelfinger did not exonerate anybody."

I then repeated the question about what the UAW knew about safety conditions at the plant.

Yokich's reply was:

"I can't tell you what the UAW in total knew about it, but I am not going to discuss the Ford Rouge explosion here. We discussed it today and we will continue to discuss it throughout the negotiations."

The UAW president's claim that Gettelfinger did not exonerate the company is patently false. On the day of the explosion Gettelfinger, the UAW International vice-president in charge of relations with Ford, praised the company, saying that the power station was among the best run plants in the Ford system.

"It was a safe facility, there's no question about that," the *Detroit News* quoted him saying. "That's why this is so perplexing to us." At a press conference the following day Gettelfinger insisted that Ford's cost-cutting had nothing to do with the explosion and had not led to an erosion of safety.

The UAW has refused to explain the contradiction between the statements made by power plant workers before the blast and the whitewashing of management by top union officials afterwards. Safety complaints are filed with union representatives and it is inconceivable that the union was unaware of the dangers in the 78-year-old facility. If top UAW officials are now silent it is because they want to cover up the fact that they ignored the warnings of workers before the deadly explosion.



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