

Safety agency says Ford hinders probe into February explosion at Michigan factory

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More than four months have passed since the February 1 explosion at Ford Motor Co.'s River Rouge complex power plant in Dearborn, Michigan that led to the deaths of six workers. Spokesman from the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) are now saying that Ford management is obstructing its investigation into the blast, the deadliest in an auto plant in the last 50 years.

According to a May 29 article in the *Detroit Free Press* Ford has hired the prestigious international law firm McDermott, Will and Emery to represent it during the investigation. Ford has said it will not release information about any safety complaints at the plant, citing "privacy issues."

"It has been a different dynamic than with Ford in the past," said Maura Campbell, spokeswoman for the state's Department of Consumer and Industry Services, which oversees MIOSHA. "Since this [law] firm entered, it has slowed the process."

The company denies that there were any safety problems at its 78-year old power plant.

Dearborn officials who are carrying out a separate investigation into the causes of the explosion have praised Ford for its "cooperation." This is no surprise. Ford is the largest employer in Dearborn and maintains its corporate headquarters in the Detroit suburb. There have also been complaints that some of the Dearborn inspectors have close ties to the company, may have been hired at the direction of Ford and have even worked for Ford before.

Last February Ford executives were praised by the news media and the United Auto Workers union for their response to the disaster and agreement to cooperate in a full investigation to determine its causes. This lent credibility to the claim that the explosion was the not the result of company negligence, but an

unfortunate, albeit unavoidable, accident. Ford's efforts to block any inquiry into safety violations at the plant make it clear that management has something to hide.

Detroit Free Press writer Narij Warikoo has reported that three of the six workers who died from injuries had filed health and safety complaints before the explosion. One of the three men had repeatedly warned coworkers to "stay away" from Boiler No. 6 where the explosion occurred.

Co-workers said John Arseneau, a 45-year-old pipefitter, told them that Boiler No. 6 was dangerous. "He told us many times, 'If you see us working there on Boiler 6, stay away from it,'" said, Gerry Villata, 65, a pipe insulator with 38 years at Ford. "He said it every time he would see us."

Arsenau and Ken Anderson, 44, filed health and safety complaints before the disaster. Anderson had also requested to be transferred from the powerhouse a year before the blast, according to family members.

The family of Ken Anderson, who suffered painful skin burns and the destruction of his lungs before his death two weeks after the blast, has filed a lawsuit against Rouge Steel (the co-owner of the power plant) charging the company with negligence for maintaining a dangerous facility.

A preliminary investigation found that natural gas in Boiler #6 ignited, causing the explosion and the fire that swept through five floors of the building. On the day of the explosion the boiler had been shut off for its annual inspection and was cooling down. When the explosion occurred workers were in the process of "blanking" Boiler #6, a process that involves inserting a piece of metal in the incoming gas lines to prevent fuel from reaching the boiler's firebox. This unusual procedure was used because the valves were so old and were known to have leaked, even after being turned off.

The boiler exploded at 1 p.m., most likely because gas continued to flow into the still hot boiler.

Chrystal Harper, the wife of Donald Harper, 57, who was working on Boiler # 6 and was killed instantly in the blast, told the *Free Press* that her husband had also filed safety complaints before the explosion. "He was concerned about the safety of the building because it was so old," said Harper. "I remember him saying that if something ever happened to him at the plant, that I should look into it."

Ford and the UAW announced last fall that a new power plant would be built and the old one retired in 2000. Powerhouse workers believe that once the new plant was scheduled Ford made a business decision to invest as little money as possible in the antiquated facility. As one said, "I knew it'd be running on bubble gum and bobby pins" until its retirement. "I knew they'd only fix what they had to fix to keep it running."

Robert, a 65-year-old Ford boiler operator, who asked that his last name not be used because of fear of management reprisal, told the *Free Press*, "the work that was supposed to be done was not done.

"The majority of maintenance people were getting teed off because they weren't getting overtime to do their jobs," Robert said. "It was a big issue. You can't maintain that type of building with only eight hours of maintenance." Last fall Robert recalled a warm-up line, which warms up the turbines for the boilers, was leaking and needed to be patched. "We put in the recs [requests for repairs], but they never got filled."

The reports about Boiler #6 and the powerhouse workers' safety complaints cast the UAW in an even more damning light. They raise a number of questions about the UAW's role in the disaster.

What did the UAW know about the state of Boiler # 6 before the explosion? What steps did it take to follow up on workers' safety complaints (which were jointly filed with the union and management) and implement the necessary measures to avert a catastrophe? How does the UAW square the dire warnings made by powerhouse workers about safety in the plant with the claims of top UAW officials immediately after the blast?

Within hours of the explosion Ron Gettelfinger, UAW International vice-president, Ford department, 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," he told the *Detroit News*. "That's why this is so perplexing to us."

At a press conference the day after the explosion Gettelfinger denied that Ford's cost-cutting and downsizing had any impact on the safety of workers. "I don't think there has been an erosion of safety," Gettelfinger declared. "We have productivity committees and health and safety committees and we work these things out internally. Ford has opened up the door to us. When there is cost-cutting, Ford's concern has always been with the people impacted."

The UAW has felt no obligation to explain the contradiction between these statements and those given by their own members. Neither Local 600 officials, Gettelfinger's office nor any other UAW spokesman responded to phone calls made by the *World Socialist Web Site*. The author of the May 29 *Free Press* article told the WSWS that union officials also refused to respond to his inquiries.

If, somehow, the UAW bureaucracy was ignorant of the safety concerns of the power plant workers that would be damning enough. However, a more likely explanation is that UAW officials lied about these dangerous conditions because they could also be held accountable for ignoring their members' warnings. By rushing to management's defense the UAW was not only covering up for the corporation, but for itself.

If, as it is becoming increasingly clear, Ford is criminally negligent in the death of six auto workers and the pain and suffering of their families, the UAW must be held equally responsible.



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