

Explosion at US Ford plant: report exposes corporate negligence and union complicity

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11 September 1999

Top Ford officials were well informed of life-threatening hazards at the Dearborn, Michigan power plant prior to the fatal explosion there last February, but did nothing to implement standard safety measures because they did not want to spend the money. This was among the revelations exposed in a report September 2 by the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) into the February 1 explosion at the Ford Rouge complex powerhouse, which killed six workers and severely injured 14 others.

The report was issued following a seven-month investigation by state safety agencies into the worst disaster to hit the US auto industry in a half century. One of the reasons cited by the agency for the long delay in releasing the report was Ford's refusal to make available safety records and other key documents. Earlier in the year MIOSHA officials accused Ford of obstructing the investigation.

Inspectors from the Bureau of Construction Codes, the agency that jointly investigated the blast with MIOSHA, have concluded that the explosion was caused by a natural gas buildup in Boiler #6, one of seven boilers at the powerhouse that provided steam for the complex. On February 1, at around 8 a.m., workers shut down the boiler for annual maintenance. Although they took measures to stop the flow of gas into the boiler, fuel continued to seep in. More than four hours later the accumulated gas was ignited by hot slag or some other heat source, causing the massive explosion and fire.

MIOSHA inspectors said that the gas buildup would not have occurred if Ford officials had installed a \$12 million ventilation system, which their insurance carrier, outside consulting firms and a joint Ford-United Auto Workers report recommended. MIOSHA uncovered two independent audits, one in 1987 and one in 1997, and an internal report from lower management and the union, urging company officials to install the system, a standard precaution in the industry for over 20 years.

"The audits specifically told them," said MIOSHA supervisor Chuck Lorish, "but they took a look at them and said, 'Naaa.'"

State investigators said Ford officials, including those on the six-person committee that oversaw the plant's maintenance, said installing the system would be too costly and cumbersome to maintain. "The memo complained that if we upgraded, we'll have to upgrade every year," Lorish said. In 1989, a Ford study

that recommended the vent installation reached top officials, but was never passed on to Ford's safety division, MIOSHA inspectors said.

Inspectors also found that many safety devices had been disabled or removed years ago. These included pressure-relief valves, alarms on the boiler and its fuel system and a device known as a "fire-eye," that is designed to trigger the shut down of incoming fuel into the boiler in the absence of a flame.

Jim Padilla, Ford's manufacturing vice president, acknowledged that this latter device had been disconnected as long ago as 1966. But, he said, "we ran that operation safely and effectively for more than 30 years. So it's not clear to us that any one single thing could have prevented this occurrence." Ford spokesman Nick Sharkey said the device "was taken out of service because it never worked. It frequently shut down the boiler; even when the boiler was running fine."

"The fire-eye is one of the most crucial safety devices," a powerhouse worker at a GM plant told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "It uses an infrared eye to detect if the boiler's flame is still on. It's incredible that the boiler was operating without one for 30 years. If the devices were not operating right, the boilers should have been shut down and they could have been replaced. Ford did not want to interfere with production. They were ruthless. They said, 'Let's not spend the money.' They let these guys die."

In addition, four engineering and consultant firms hired by Ford, as well as one its insurance carriers, also recommended that flame supervision and combustion controls be restored or installed. Ford ignored these suggestions as well.

In its report MIOSHA cited "a significant number of workplace safety and health violations at the time of the explosion." These included: disconnecting safety devices; and failing to repair valves, provide a means of blocking the flow of gas into an idle boiler, provide written procedures for the startup and shutdown of boilers and removal of flammable coal dust from the area.

A reporter from the *Detroit Free Press* close to the investigation told the WSWWS that MIOSHA inspectors were working their way up the corporate chain of command to determine which officials were involved. The inspectors believed that their findings would almost certainly lead to

criminal indictments of top Ford officials.

These were the circumstances under which Ford officials, the UAW and the Michigan Department of Consumer and Industry Services (CIS), the state agency that oversees MIOSHA, reached an agreement September 2 to settle claims against the company for violating state occupational safety laws.

Under the terms of the settlement, Ford will pay a civil fine of \$1.5 million and contribute another \$5.5 million for job safety programs and medical research. In exchange, the corporation acknowledges no liability or fault, nor any violations of the state's occupational and safety laws. Moreover, the state will be barred from seeking criminal charges or referring any of its findings for prosecution in any local, state or federal court.

The amount Ford will pay is equal to one day's worth of profits for the world's second largest carmaker, which took in \$335 million last quarter. Company officials hope the settlement will derail future legal action by the survivors of the blast and the families of the deceased, many of whom have refused to accept an out-of court settlement with Ford.

Claimants in similar corporate negligence cases have won large awards. A California jury recently ordered GM to pay over \$4 billion to the victims of a gas tank explosion after their lawyers proved that executives had ignored warnings about the unsafe design of the car involved. Under Michigan's restrictive workers compensation laws an injured worker can only sue his or her employer if "willfulness" or "intentional indifference" can be shown. There is no doubt that such evidence was emerging against Ford and its top officials when the joint settlement was announced.

"My friends are dead and all Ford got was a slap on the wrist." Terry Cline, a worker at the Ford power plant, told the WWS. "What's wrong with this picture? The short article that I cut out of the *Detroit Free Press* explains it all: 'State investigators were planning to look into who in Ford's management knew about the safety problems. But the probe was cut short after Ford came forward with the idea of negotiating a deal.'"

State officials from Michigan's Consumer and Industry Services department, an agency stacked with appointees of Republican Governor John Engler, did little to hide the fact that the agreement was designed to prevent future legal action against the company. CIS Deputy Director Dr. Kalmin Smith said the "exceptional compliance resolution minimizes the possibility of a lengthy legal battle."

The settlement was signed by the UAW International and UAW Local 600, which represents workers at the Ford Rouge complex. The UAW was party to the agreement because union officials are concerned that further exposure of criminal negligence will implicate union officials as well.

Under the national UAW-Ford contract, the union and management are jointly responsible for job safety. As the MIOSHA report cited, "the investigation identified important deficiencies and unsafe workplace practices to both Ford and

the UAW."

Union officials were well aware of the unsafe conditions at the power plant and did nothing about it. Three of the six workers who were killed in the blast had filed safety grievances with the union, warning of potential dangers including the specific boiler that exploded. Powerhouse workers repeatedly complained that the 80-year-old facility was being poorly maintained because the company had decided to replace it in 2000. Like Ford officials, the UAW ignored the workers' warnings.

After the explosion high-ranking UAW officials covered up what they knew was the truth: that the powerhouse was a death trap. Within hours of the blast UAW International Vice President Ron Gettelfinger was declaring to the local media that the power plant was one of the safest facilities in Ford's system. Gettelfinger later responded to a question from this reporter at a press conference that Ford's downsizing and cost-cutting campaign was not undermining workers' safety.

After the release of the MIOSHA findings, the UAW once again ran to the defense of the company, issuing a joint statement with Ford management, claiming that "no one factor or event was responsible" for the disaster and pledging that the union and management would work hard to improve safety in the plants.

Significantly, as part of the settlement with the state of Michigan, Ford agreed to give the UAW more than \$1 million to set up a joint Ford-UAW scholarship fund and other programs. This amounts to a payoff for the union's role in protecting the identity of those who were responsible for the deaths and injuries of the Rouge workers.

The MIOSHA findings demonstrate that the victims of the Ford Rouge explosion were sacrificed for corporate profit. Before, during and after this tragedy, the UAW has rallied to the defense of Ford management, revealing, once again, that this organization long ago abandoned the defense of auto workers' interests.



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