

Reader comments on Ford Rouge explosion

10 February 2000

I have followed with great interest your many reports on the explosion in February 1999 that killed six workers and injured dozens more at Ford's Rouge facility in Dearborn, Michigan. Your exposure of the complicity of both the company and the United Auto Workers bureaucracy in attempting to cover up their responsibility for the disaster has been most compelling. It seems abundantly clear to any fair minded reader that Ford and the UAW ignored a number of warnings on the hazardous conditions that existed in the Rouge power plant prior to the explosion and are now doing their best to cover things over.

You will be interested to learn that Ford Motor Company, standing in the best traditions of corporate marketing and public relations strategy, has dispatched its top global fire protection and life safety manager to make some hay out of the disaster.

Ford's Michael Wansa, teamed with HSB Industrial Risk Insurer Larry Wenzel, have stepped out onto the disaster management conference circuit in an effort to further whitewash the whole rather nasty Rouge affair. They have a catchy title for their presentation, sure to pack in scads of conventioners: "Explosive Event! Lessons Learned at the Ford-Rouge Facility." They next speak (the keynote address, no less) on March 19 in San Diego at the Disaster Recovery Journal's 22nd Annual Conference.

In examining the blurb that goes with the advertisement of their session, one is immediately struck by the cold fist of corporate calculation. Let me quote: "Early in 1999, an explosion occurred at the Ford Rouge facility in Dearborn, Michigan. This facility is Henry Ford's original assembly plant, and a large percentage of Ford Mustangs that are on the road today started as a piece of steel at one end of this facility and were driven out at the other end. The explosion completely disconnected all of the utilities for this entire facility, which is better than a mile long. Representatives from Ford and HSB Industrial Insurers

will briefly explain what happened and then discuss how Ford put this facility back into production in extremely short order."

That's it! A prospective conference attendee could be forgiven if he was unaware that six men died and many others suffered horrific injuries in the "explosive event". That victim's families were told to shut up and rank-and-file whistle-blowers "muscle" by the union. That another man was seriously injured in the same area shortly after production was restored. Never mind about all of that—the facility produces Mustangs! And don't forget to mention the real tragedy—that all the plant's utilities were disconnected!

Yes, briefly explain "what happened." Hard to really avoid entirely. Can't spend too much time here, though. Don't want to deal with any of those bothersome questions about unheeded warnings; sordid cost-benefit risk analysis that puts production quotas ahead of human lives or corporate-union cover-up. No. Let's go straight to a proud discussion of how we got straight back into production. That's the important thing. Why, those disaster managers will eat this stuff up!

I wonder how many corporate desks and cutout cubicles the text of the "Explosive Event" presentation crossed over at Ford headquarters—and if anyone, even just for a moment, said "wait a minute, people died here!"

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