

One year since Dearborn, Michigan explosion

New revelations expose company-union complicity in fatal blast at US Ford plant

"They decided to put profits over safety"

Jerry White
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Tuesday, February 1 was the first anniversary of the explosion at the Ford Rouge power plant in Dearborn, Michigan that killed six auto workers and injured dozens of others. The occasion was marked by a memorial at the United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 600 union hall, attended by hundreds of UAW members, including at least a dozen of the 34 survivors of the blast, some still recovering from severe burns and other injuries. Throughout the Rouge complex, including the Ford auto and Rouge Steel facilities, workers held two minutes of silence for the deceased workers.

At 1:02 PM last February 1, gas inside the No. 6 boiler at the power plant ignited, causing a massive explosion and fire ball that ripped through the facility. The blast threw workers to the ground and fire seared through the clothing and skin of many. Donald Harper, 58, who was working on the 60-foot tall boiler, was killed instantly. Over the next three weeks, five others—Warren Blow, 51; Ron Moritz and Ken Anderson, 44; Cody Boatwright, 51; and John Arseneau, 45—died from their injuries.

In his remarks at Tuesday's ceremony, UAW Local 600 President Jerry Sullivan kept silent about well-publicized evidence that Ford ignored warnings of hazardous conditions at the power plant prior to the explosion. Instead, he joined Ford CEO Jac Nasser and other company officials in promoting the claim that the tragedy was an unavoidable accident.

Jim Padilla, Ford's vice-president for manufacturing operations, told the audience, "Not a day goes by this past year that I haven't asked myself what we could have done differently, how we could have prevented this tragedy that disrupted and devastated so many lives."

In reality, there is an increasing body of evidence that the disaster—the deadliest in the history of the US auto industry—was, at the very least, the result of criminal negligence, and quite possibly a case of corporate manslaughter. Recent information, based on thousands of pages of documents released to local newspapers by Michigan and Dearborn investigators, demonstrates that Ford management was well aware of the potential for disaster, but made a calculated decision not to spend the money needed to improve safety conditions.

The documents also reveal that UAW officials ignored safety grievances filed by powerhouse workers complaining of antiquated and dangerous equipment, including the very boiler that exploded. Ford and its law firm asked the state to withhold or censor these

documents, claiming they contained trade secrets.

The *Detroit News* reported January 28 that Ford and Rouge Steel, the co-owners of the power plant, rejected the repeated advice of independent auditors over a twelve-year period to install new safety equipment. In 1987, Ford hired Black & Veatch, an engineering firm, to study the boilers and their fuel sources. The firm's recommendations included replacing the boiler controls at a cost of \$10.2 million, a figure that was subsequently reduced to \$7 million.

But a Ford memo to the powerhouse's operating committee warned: "Once the boilers are upgraded, the 'grandfather clause' will no longer be applicable and that (sic) all present safety standards will have to be met." In other words, the company used a legal loophole that allowed it to avoid national safety standards because of the age and condition of its machinery. If it had upgraded the boilers, as its engineering firm recommended, it would have had to spend tens of millions of dollars improving safety equipment throughout the plant.

State officials now say Ford had already lost any exemption from the latest standards because in 1987 it modified Boiler No. 6 to let it fire with natural gas in six of the twelve burners. "They should have upgraded the boilers to comply with national standards," said Chuck Lorish of the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA). In August of 1990 Ford and Rouge Steel rejected Black & Veatch's recommendations, and instead commissioned another study.

State and local investigators also discovered that six months after Boiler No. 6 was installed in 1966, two safety devices were deactivated because Ford engineers said they were not working correctly and caused production delays. One was a burner control designed to detect if the flame in the firebox went out while the boiler was operating. The other was an automatic ignition system that would light the natural gas pilots and prevent gas from flowing, in case the pilots failed to light. The deactivated automatic ignition system also had a purge cycle, which removed excess gas from the building before lighting. State investigators have concluded that a build up of natural gas in Boiler No. 6 caused the explosion.

In 1990 another firm hired by Ford, Industrial Risk Insurers, recommended using combustion controls and venting. Those recommendations were repeated in 1996, 1997 and 1998. Ford commissioned another study by Sargent & Lundy in February 1998, which also recommended replacing the boiler controls. "Clearly, the

accident wouldn't have happened," if they had followed those steps, Lorish said.

Many powerhouse workers were convinced management had decided not to invest any more in the aging facility because it was scheduled to be replaced with a new power house in the year 2000. An attorney for four of the victims, Christopher Drouillard, said, Ford "did the math, and they decided to put profits over safety."

In interviews conducted by state investigators that were recently released to the *Detroit Free Press*, powerhouse workers provided detailed accounts about conditions in the facility prior to the explosion. One of the factors they pointed to was the inches-thick coal dust that coated beams, ledges and machinery, the result of years of cutbacks in overtime and the number of cleaners. This is of particular importance because an independent consultant hired by the state said coal dust caused a large secondary explosion and a ball of fire after the initial blast.

The interviews show that management, along with UAW officials, ignored the workers' warnings. Three of the six men killed in the explosion had filed health and safety grievances prior to the blast. The state files include a copy of the grievance which John Arseneau, a pipefitter who died in the explosion, filed in 1995, citing leaking valves on Boiler No. 6.

Other workers cited leaky valves and complained that valves were difficult to turn. Workers also said it was hard to determine what position the valves were in. An engineering firm hired by the state said these problems may have contributed to the blast.

State and local investigators blamed the accident on a maintenance error that left open a natural gas valve as the boiler was being shut for routine service. But if the valves were in poor condition, it is possible the workers could not tell that one was left open.

Workers also complained of a lack of training in shutting the huge boiler. Supervisors weren't required to check the valves after they were closed. The danger tags employees were supposed to use to flag valves, indicating their open status, were rarely used. Some old tags had been left in place, causing confusion. Equipment manuals were given to employees only upon request, and the last one had been handed out in 1997.

"Ford has never provided boiler training," said one worker. Another said, "It was not uncommon for employees to refuse to do unsafe jobs, but supervisors always found someone else to do it." Another added, "It took a long time to get things fixed, even items that dealt with safety."

The state conducted more than 175 worker interviews. In many of them, Ford and UAW officials sat in with the state investigators as the workers were questioned in offices at the Rouge complex. In one interview with an employee, Ford attorney Robert Gompar asked for a break in the questioning. He then accompanied the employee to the bathroom where he talked with him before the interview resumed.

The documents shed further light on how Ford and Rouge Steel sought to disrupt or influence the course of the state's investigation. The two companies were in charge of the scene of the explosion and the evidence from the beginning. A Washington, DC-based law firm hired by Ford to protect it from liability lawsuits controlled the library of evidence.

Investigators publicly complained that the law firm was withholding evidence needed to complete their inquiry. Recent documents also showed that Fire Marshal Rick Polcyn, an investigator from the city of Dearborn—where Ford is the major employer—blamed the explosion on worker error as early as March, before all of the tests and interviews

had been conducted.

The damning evidence against Ford is also an indictment of the UAW. Under the Ford-UAW national contract the union operates joint labor-management safety committees. This automatically makes it at least partially responsible for the conditions at the power plant. In practice, the union ignored the safety complaints of the workers and did little or nothing to correct dangerous conditions.

That the UAW failed to protect its members at Rouge cannot come as a surprise to anyone who is familiar with its role, particularly over the past two decades. In the name of its corporatist "partnership" with the auto companies, the union has abandoned any genuine shop floor representation and openly collaborated with the companies' cost-cutting and downsizing measures. Over the past twenty years Ford has eliminated tens of thousands of jobs, shut down scores of plants and sharply increased productivity. This enabled Ford to earn \$7.2 billion dollars last year, the highest profits ever recorded by an auto company.

UAW officials rushed to Ford's defense after the Rouge tragedy. Within hours of the explosion, Ron Gettelfinger, UAW international vice-president in charge of the union's 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* last February. "That's why this is so perplexing to us."

From the beginning the union officials' concern was not to uncover the truth about the explosion, but rather to protect the company from exposure to liability claims, and conceal their own complicity in the hazardous conditions that ultimately led to the tragedy.

Last September the UAW was a party in an agreement with Michigan's Consumer & Industry Services (CIS) Department that allowed Ford to pay a \$7 million settlement, in exchange for admitting no fault and avoiding a criminal investigation. Normally, in cases involving fatalities and willful violations, the CIS refers companies to the Michigan attorney general for possible criminal prosecution.

Terry Cline, who narrowly escaped the explosion, said recently, "How can you make a deal where six people are killed and you don't get prosecuted? The thing that bothers me is they've walked away from it. Five million, seven million, whatever the hell it is. That's pocket change to them."

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. Many workers might, with justification, consider this a payoff for the union's role in protecting the identity of those responsible for the deaths and injuries of the Rouge workers.



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