

“GM is alright with safety as long as it doesn’t interfere with sending parts out the door.”

Worker killed in chemical explosion at Indiana GM plant

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One worker was killed and several others injured in a chemical explosion Tuesday afternoon at the General Motors metal stamping plant in Marion, Indiana, about 60 miles northeast of Indianapolis.

James L. Gibson, a 48-year-old worker for Quaker Chemical, which is contracted by GM to handle metal-processing chemicals, was pronounced dead at Marion General Hospital about an hour after the blast. Gibson, who had worked at the GM site since September 2012, was well known. Several workers interviewed by local media expressed sadness over this death.

Workers inside the plant were shaken by the explosion, which took place in an area of the plant known as the “oil house.” Emergency crews from the Marion Fire Department reported that the explosion and subsequent spill involved a tank of chlorine dioxide, a chemical used in the metal stamping or cleaning process.

Eight workers were reportedly exposed to the chemical, which irritates skin and eyes and can cause lung problems if inhaled. A hazardous materials team contained the chemical spill while Marion firefighters rinsed off everyone who may have had come into contact with the chemical. Several workers were treated in the hospital and released.

Immediately after the explosion, which occurred around 2 p.m. Tuesday, the factory was evacuated. Hundreds of workers on the second shift, which starts at 2:30 p.m., were forced to wait in the parking lot for two hours before the shift was cancelled. “People were saying they could see a cloud of gas still hanging over the plant and we got reports about workers being burnt and injured,” a veteran worker told the WSWS, “and still management was thinking they could just clean up the mess and run production.”

Production was resumed Wednesday morning after the cancellation of Tuesday’s second and third shifts. The company issued a perfunctory statement about the death of

Gibson and announced that it would cooperate with authorities in an investigation of the incident.

Many workers expressed disbelief and anger that GM had restored production so quickly after the fatal accident.

According to local radio station WTHR, GM says the source of the explosion, the chemicals and welding water, which Gibson was working near, are being tested. Employees are being interviewed too, about what they saw and heard.

The 1,600 workers at the Marion Metal Center produce panels, stampings and other parts for truck assembly plants in Indiana, Michigan, Texas, Kansas and other states. It is one of only three standalone metal stamping plants—the others in Flint, Michigan and Parma, Ohio—still operated by GM in the US. In 2011, GM shut the nearby Indianapolis stamping plant—wiping out 650 jobs—after workers rebelled against demands by the corporation and the United Auto Workers union that they accept a 50 percent wage cut to attract a new owner to buy the plant.

Indiana and its automotive towns like Marion, Muncie, Kokomo, Ft. Wayne and Anderson—long identified with militant struggles by auto workers—have been laid waste by the downsizing of the auto industry with the complicity of the UAW. Between 2007 and 2009, auto parts suppliers eliminated more than 22,000 jobs, and the sector now employs 30 percent fewer workers than a decade ago, according to the *Times of Northwest Indiana* web site.

Like auto workers around the country, Marion workers have been subjected to an endless cost-cutting and speedup campaign, aided and abetted by the UAW, which has undermined safety conditions and eliminated longstanding job protections, leading to a sharp increase in outsourcing and subcontracting.

Just as the overriding drive for profit has led to the sale of cars with deadly defects and a corporate coverup, so too, has

cost-cutting concerns led GM and other auto makers to sacrifice the safety of the workers who build the cars.

A GM worker at the Marion plant with more than two decades of experience spoke with the WSWS about the background of the fatal explosion at the plant. A pseudonym is being used to protect him from retribution by GM and the UAW.

“GM has been on an outsourcing binge for several years,” Shawn said. “I’m not sure if this type of work was done in-house before with a GM employee, but I have a sense that Quaker was hired to handle the chemicals so that the company can wash its hands of any liabilities. In 2007, GM hired janitorial and machine cleaning services to replace GM workers who previously did that work.”

Federal regulators leave the enforcement of safety conditions entirely to GM and the UAW. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), an agency of the US Department of Labor, rarely, if ever, conducts investigations. “An annual safety audit is done in-house by General Motors headquarters and joint health and safety committees run by the company and the union,” the worker said. “OSHA only gets involved if something catastrophic happens or a audit shows a blatant case of non-compliance.”

Up to a year-and-a-half ago, Shawn said, the Marion plant was ranked at the very bottom of GM for safety in terms of lost workdays and near-miss accidents. “Since then we’ve moved up in relation to other locations, according to the safety audits and actual incidents. We get the feeling that GM is alright with safety as long as it doesn’t interfere with its ability to send parts out the door.”

“Safety isn’t driven by any humanitarian concerns. It’s bound up with the costing and competitive metrics. The audit is based on standards and policies agreed to by the union and management from the corporate and national down to the local level. If you’re safer than a plant in Ohio—if your workers’ compensation costs and man-days lost to injuries are lower—you’ll get the work. The safety audits are done to improve your standing in the corporation versus other locations.”

Indianapolis television station WRTV reported that the Indiana Department of Labor cited the plant in December 2009 for a single serious safety violation. The plant paid a derisory penalty of \$845 and state regulators declared that the company had completed its corrective requirements.

The 2009 incident, Shawn said, involved a cable breaking on a crane, which resulted in a load of coiled steel falling onto a tractor-trailer flatbed. “Fortunately no one was injured because they were far enough away. That generated the attention of OSHA.

“Their slogan is that safety is our overriding concern. It is a fine sentiment to work under. Everybody wants to come

home with the same number of limbs they left home with. On the local level, I don’t think the managers want to see anyone hurt. But ascending to the corporate boardroom, the directors look at us as numbers or costs to be controlled or eliminated.

“There have been safety improvements over the last two decades. Years ago, workers would stick their arms under the stamping presses to retrieve panels. There have been technical inventions that make panel handling safer. The veteran workers say in the old days, the union would hit the company over the head over safety issues. Now there is a partnership between the union and the company. Now the reflexive reaction is this is the way of life in a stamping plant: it’s inherently risky.”

Not too long ago, a worker in the plant had his foot run over and crushed by a forklift that backed up into him. “He was just eight days from retirement and he lost his foot,” Shawn said. “He was walking in a designated walking area. The company said he was reading the daily plant information bulletin while he was walking so they could make it sound like it was his fault.

“The company looks hard to see how workers are at fault rather than accept their own culpability. This is a 2.7 million square foot plant. Why are walkways right next to racks filled with materials? Why aren’t there overhead walkways so workers don’t come into contact with moving materials? It’s because the company is not willing to invest. When it comes to the existential question of sacrificing profit for safety we know what side the workers are on—and what side the company is.

“Safety is used by the company and against us—either to demand outsourcing of work to a third-party company with less stringent standards or to discipline or fire workers for safety violations. In other words, for them, it’s another way to cull the overpopulated herd of overpaid GM workers.”



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