

Many questions in Detroit GM plant explosion

Shannon Jones
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There are many unanswered questions about the explosion yesterday at the General Motors Detroit-Hamtramck assembly plant that injured three workers. According to press reports, the three workers were involved in maintenance work on the rust inhibitor unit when a pipe exploded. The three sustained burns and one was transported to the hospital.

GM officials tried to downplay the incident and maintain production but workers in several departments were sent home for the day following the blast. There were reports that some workers would not be called back today.

Detroit firefighters said that a pressure pump caused the explosion at just before 10 am. There are about 1,800 workers at the plant, which builds the Buick LaCrosse and several Chevrolet models. In March, GM eliminated a production shift at the plant, impacting some 1,300 workers.

A GM worker at the plant contacted by the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* said his department had been sent home after workers learned of the explosion from the news. “It is crazy,” he said. “They didn’t say anything about an explosion. We found out about it during break watching the news. I said, ‘That’s our plant!’” He added that workers on his shift did not get paid for the time they were off work due to the evacuation.

The GM worker continued, “They said it was a pipe connected to the rust inhibitor. They said it could have been worse if the whole tank had blown.”

Typically, there was no official comment by the United Auto Workers on the explosion and the Detroit-Hamtramck UAW Local 22 website did not carry a report of the incident or what workers should expect next in terms of an investigation.

The workers involved in the maintenance would normally have been skilled trades workers. In recent years, Detroit automakers have been pushing, with the

collaboration of the UAW, for the so-called cross training of trades. This involves schemes for having skilled trades workers perform tasks outside their areas of expertise. Such practices put workers in the position of performing work for which they are not adequately prepared, heightening safety risks.

At Fiat Chrysler, this has gone as far as having production workers do certain tasks normally done by skilled trades workers, who undergo extensive training.

Detroit Hamtramck GM workers contacted by the *Autoworker Newsletter* expressed anger at being continuously kept in the dark by management and the UAW. One recently laid-off GM worker, who maintains close contact with workers still in the plant, said, “They don’t ever tell you anything. When someone dies in the plant, they always say he died at the hospital. They keep everything hush-hush. The only way we will learn anything is ‘underground,’ by word of mouth.”

He said, from the information he had received, the explosion likely took place in the body shop where the frames are treated with rust inhibitor. “There are dangers all over the plant,” he said, due to the large number of steam pipes. “In the body shop area, you have to be a little more careful because the lighting is not so good. It was part of the old, original plant. It is like you are going into twilight.

“Over in body there are more robots. It is very mechanical, so you have to pay a lot of attention.”

He said a worker he knew told him she had been told she might have to miss an extra day of work because of the explosion.

The worker expressed no confidence in the phony investigation by the UAW-GM Joint Health and Safety Committee. “Basically, the UAW and management are in bed together.

“Once the UAW got hold of the retiree money,” he said, “there was no more union,” the worker added, referring to

the fact that the UAW is now the largest single stockholder in GM through its control of the retiree health care trust fund.

The explosion at the Detroit-Hamtramck plant comes just one month after the conclusion of a conference of the UAW-GM Joint Health and Safety Committee at the luxurious Marriot Hotel in the Detroit Greektown Casino. According to the official handout, the conference stressed “union management collaboration” in creating an “improved safety culture.”

In fact, militant workers have long understood that a regime of union-management collaboration means the elimination of any genuine representation in the factories. The role of the UAW, which is more or less openly expressed, is to aid in the cover-up of unsafe conditions and silence those workers who try to speak out against management abuses.

At Ford this has gone forward to the extent that management, the UAW and the Michigan Occupational Health and Safety Administration (MIOSHA) have created a joint partnership aimed at reducing the number of safety inspections as well as the probability of fines. The partnership agreement states that among the benefits to management will be “the diminished probability of wall-to-wall inspections” and “maximum penalty reductions.”

As part of the arrangement, Ford gets advance notice of inspections. The practical effect of the agreement is to make management and their puppets in the UAW responsible for health and safety conditions with the barest fig leaf of outside monitoring.

Workers must receive complete answers about the circumstances surrounding the explosion at the Detroit Hamtramck plant. This will not come from the UAW or the corrupt MIOSHA, but only through the independent action and initiative of workers. The *World Socialist Web Site* is willing to assist this effort and urges workers with any information regarding the explosion or general conditions at the plant to contact the *Autoworker Newsletter*.



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