

Fire forces evacuation at Saginaw, Michigan General Motors plant

Tim Rivers
29 July 2019

Workers at Saginaw Metal Casting Operations (SMCO) in Michigan were forced to evacuate their factory early last Tuesday morning after fire erupted when molten aluminum contacted flammable material in the exhaust duct of a casting machine. The blaze shot quickly to the outside of the structure, where it collapsed other ductwork before firefighters succeeded in containing it.

The Saginaw Fire Department arrived at the plant on the city's northeast side shortly before 1:00 a.m. on July 23. On route to the fire, they had called for additional support from the Buena Vista Fire Department, as well as from some of their own off-duty personnel. The brigade extinguished flames on the building exterior before joining General Motors employees inside for the final containment.

Battalion Chief Gregory Simmons reported to MLive that the plant's fire brigade had acted quickly to contain the blaze. "The fire had started in an area where there was molten aluminum," he said.

"The fire primarily stayed in ductwork, which made it easier for the on-site fire battalion and brigade to contain it. At one point, the sprinkler system contained in some of the duct work came on and off, so that knocked a lot of the fire down."

In this case no one was injured, and the plant was able to resume operations the next day. But the outcome could have been much worse.

SMCO workers are under a concessionary "competitive operating agreement" aimed at saving money for GM. Such agreements inevitably lead to the cutting of corners on work rules and safety in the name of driving up returns for stockholders.

In a related incident, Ford Motor Company's Sterling Axle Plant in nearby Sterling Heights, Michigan, had to be evacuated when 30,000 gallons of oil inside a

machine that distributes oil to equipment throughout the factory caught fire in the early morning hours of July 9. Like the Saginaw Metal Casting Operations plant, it too operates with a "competitive operating agreement."

An explosion and fire at the Meridian Magnesium Products of America in Eaton Rapids, Michigan, in May 2018 injured two workers and temporarily halted production of the Ford F-150 pickup truck as well as impacting production at GM, Fiat Chrysler and BMW.

The conditions at SMCO are the outcome of decades of collaboration between the UAW and management that have resulted in the decimation of jobs and the undermining of working conditions.

For more than 100 years Saginaw, Michigan, 75 miles north of Detroit, has been the seat of General Motors metal casting operations. Opened in 1918, this plant and the associated complex have been the center of General Motors drive train production providing the foundation for the city's economy.

Saginaw Metal Casting Operations is GM's largest aluminum casting plant, occupying a 1.9-million-square foot facility surrounded by a 490 acre site and producing engine blocks and cylinder heads for SUVs and midsize trucks.

The past four decades have been marked by consolidations, layoffs, concessions, splits, sell-offs and bankruptcies. As recently as 2004, SMCO employed 1,700 workers. Today the total number of jobs has been reduced to 476; just 371 production workers and 105 salaried.

Mass layoffs were used as a wedge to ram through concessions contracts that froze and cut wages, reduced personal days, cut cost-of-living adjustments and introduced part-time and at-will contract labor. Moreover, the corporation demanded and received

massive tax abatements, supposedly to save jobs, undermining funding for the city's schools and municipal services.

Over the years GM has consolidated, sold off and shut down one factory after another in the Saginaw area. From a high population of 99,000 in 1960, the city has been reduced to just 48,677 residents, as reported in the census of 2017.

Saginaw Transmission, currently owned by TRW Automotive, producing brake components, was spun off as part of Delphi in 1999.

The plant known as Saginaw Malleable Iron, which opened in 1919, was shut down in 2007.

Saginaw Steering Gear, known as "The Gun Plant," was built in 1941 to produce machine guns and carbines during World War II. After the war, normal steering gear production continued until its closure in 2001. It has since been demolished.

The former Saginaw Steering Division of GM is a sprawling five-plant complex, division headquarters and large engineering center that was spun off to Delphi in 1999. GM re-purchased the steering division from bankrupt Delphi in 2009 and then sold the division to Chinese-based Pacific Century Motors in 2010 that now operates the facility as Nexteer Automotive.

At every step of the process, workers paid with their physical well-being in the form of lost jobs, destroyed working and safety conditions, wage cuts and the destruction of holidays and break time.

GM's operations in Saginaw illustrate the globally integrated character of auto production.

For example, when the three advanced aluminum casting processes, green sand, lost foam and precision sand, were introduced at SMCO in 2011, GM reported in the business pages that their new engines were co-developed with Shanghai Automotive Industry Corp. (SAIC), Shanghai General Motors (SGM) and the Pan Asia Technical Automotive Center (PATAC).

An investor's news brief boasted that "the new global engine family" was part of its "strategy to reduce engineering and manufacturing complexity and cost."

The brief made a point of highlighting the UAW's acceptance of another round of attacks on the workforce.

"The GM Powertrain Saginaw Metal Casting

Operations management, United Auto Workers Local 668 and IAM Local 2839 leadership successfully negotiated competitive operating agreements that improve operational effectiveness. The agreements also address processes and methods to improve production quality and safety of the operations."

In the face of the global strategy of the corporations workers must develop their own comprehensive and thoroughly worked out global strategy to advance their own independent interests. This requires in the first place rejecting the nationalist program of the unions that is aimed at dividing workers from their allies in Mexico, China, Europe and globally. Instead of uniting all workers regardless of nationality in common fight the UAW tells workers they must accept concessions in order to compete against their foreign counterparts for a dwindling number of available jobs.

The result is the destruction of wages, benefits and the undermining of safety for all workers in a dog-eat-dog race to the bottom.

Workers must draw a balance sheet from these experiences. They need to build rank and file committees as new and wholly independent organizations to fight for their own interests. They must base their struggles on a fully worked out global strategy, seeking to establish links with workers in Canada, Mexico and beyond on the basis of their common interests. The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party alone is organizing such a fight.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact