

Explosion at Faurecia Gladstone auto parts plant in Indiana injures three

Tim Rivers

20 November 2020

Shortly after 2 a.m. Friday morning, the supply tank at a propane filling station exploded when a forklift driver was servicing her machine, causing a fire in the refueling area on the outside of the Faurecia Gladstone auto parts plant in Columbus, Indiana.

The operator Sheila Skaggs, who has decades of experience, was unable to escape the resulting inferno because her safety harness refused to release, a worker at the plant reported to the *Autoworker Newsletter*. Severely burned, she was airlifted to a burn unit at a hospital in Indianapolis, the state capital, 40 miles north. As of this writing her condition is not known. Two other workers were injured, receiving treatment at the scene.

A dayshift employee who was just getting up before starting work at 4:00 a.m. said the force of the blast shook his house, which is two blocks away.

The plant was temporarily evacuated, but operations had already resumed within a few hours later Friday morning.

The explosion and fire activated the sprinkler system on the exterior of the plant before the Columbus Fire Department (CFD) arrived, according to a statement posted on Facebook by the department. A representative of the Gladstone Station of the CFD contacted by the WSWS said that the source of the explosion was not yet known, but that its investigation would resume on Monday.

According to workers on the scene, gross negligence and neglect on the part of company management was directly responsible for the carnage. The propane tank which serves as a refueling station for forklifts had been the subject of a number of complaints.

Multiple workers reported to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* that repeated complaints about the smell of gas and headaches in the vicinity of

the offending propane tank had been acknowledged by Ruth Means, the head of human resources at the plant, and by a production supervisor in the area over the course of the past several weeks, but that they failed to deal with the problem.

During the day on Friday, the company floated the allegation that the explosion was the fault of the forklift operator, claiming that she had driven away from the refill station without first disconnecting the filler hose. Workers who spoke with the WSWS declared that the company's claims were "an out and out lie."

Those workers who are familiar with the equipment were quick to dismantle company's allegation. Unlike a typical neighborhood gas pump, workers said, the line from the refill station to the forklift must be disconnected before the operator can connect the newly replenished on-board tank to the motor. Without fuel the machine cannot start, making it impossible for the operator to do as the company alleges.

The operator's injuries are so horrific and the culpability so blatant, it is no surprise the company is looking for a way to dodge responsibility. Workers reported that in the early afternoon Faurecia had the propane service company remove and replace the tank which had exploded, critical evidence in explaining the cause of the blast.

Based on the evidence of numerous recorded complaints about gas fumes in the area, the more plausible explanation for the explosion and the devastating fire which ensued is that the leak had gotten so bad and the fumes so thick that after refueling when the operator hit the ignition the whole cloud of gas in the area ignited, igniting the storage tank itself.

In August, workers at the Gladstone plant, facing the utter indifference to safety by the company and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers

(IBEW) union, launched a rank-and-file safety committee in order to fight for real measures to protect against the coronavirus pandemic. In its October 19 statement demanding a two-week shutdown to stop the spread of COVID-19, the committee declared: “Neither the union nor the company has paid any attention to the suffering and stress that we face every day. All they care about is their parts. We come to work knowing that we are putting our lives at risk. What’s worse is the danger that we may carry the virus home to our families.” These words have been tragically confirmed in the horrific explosion in the early hours on Friday morning.

In the same statement, the committee explained, “Neither the company nor the union can be trusted to provide a safe work environment. Just the opposite, they are working us beyond the point of exhaustion, and many of our coworkers have already gone to an early grave. Government watchdogs, such as OSHA, for example, have been called many times and done nothing. They are trying to scare people to make us come to work by saying the factory will shut its doors and not reopen if we don’t come to work. But this only means that the safety of workers conflicts with the profit motives of the corporations.”

According to the Occupational Health and Safety Agency (OSHA) website, inspections it conducted over the last two years determined that Faurecia had four serious safety violations at the Gladstone plant. However, as is typical for the pro-corporate agency, only \$14,675 in slap-on-the-wrist fines were imposed. Following “informal settlements” between OSHA and Faurecia, these were subsequently reduced to just \$7,175. And according to OSHA’s website, some of that pitiful amount is even still being contested.

Propane is naturally odorless, but its manufacturers add a chemical called mercaptan, which has a disagreeable “rotten egg” smell, in order to alert those nearby when there is a leak.

Because nausea and dizziness are common symptoms for both coronavirus and propane poisoning, some workers have questioned whether those who had these symptoms and were sent to be tested for COVID-19 may have been suffering from propane poisoning. That could explain why a number who had symptoms tested negative for the virus.

“There are so many safety violations in the shop, you

do not know how to protect yourself,” a member of the Gladstone Rank-and-File Safety Committee concluded. Referring to the victim of this latest atrocity, he continued, “She is going to be scarred for life through no fault of her own. And it was totally unnecessary. They are actively putting us in harm’s way. They should be held accountable.”

The Gladstone Rank-and-File Safety Committee insists that a real investigation must be conducted into Friday’s horrific accident—and not another whitewash by the company, OSHA, or the union—in order to prevent any further injury or worse in the name of Faurecia’s production quotas and profit demands. The committee urges all those with any information about the explosion to come forward by contacting autoworkers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact