

Dicastal Inc. explosion highlights dangerous conditions in auto parts industry

George Kirby
28 March 2023

Alloy wheel supplier Dicastal North America's plant in Greenville, Michigan caught fire and exploded on March 17. According to local reports, the initial fire started as a worker was performing repairs with a hand grinder on machinery. The sparks from the hand grinder inadvertently ignited aluminum dust. This set off the explosion within the foundry of the plant.

One worker was sent to the hospital after being burned, and according to Greenville city reports is "continuing to recover and his condition improves daily." Firefighters from three separate departments worked together to extinguish the fire. The question remains why a fire endangering hundreds of workers took place, and was this foreseeable and preventable?

World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter reporters spoke to Interim Director of the City of Greenville Department of Public Safety, Brian Blomstrom. He provided the most recent press releases on the explosion and only reported that the foundry was shut down and Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) was there again today assessing the explosion. This reporter also asked why the plant had continued to run despite the explosion to which he only replied that most workers couldn't afford to be laid off. "There was no damage to the line," he said adding the company had "stock parts."

According to press reports there was extensive damage in the northeast corner of the plant. Sergeant Steve DeWitt with the Greenville Department of Public Safety told reporters the explosion took place in the furnace room, where large blocks of solid aluminum or magnesium are melted down.

"One of the challenges that we have with this type of fire is we cannot use water on liquid metal. Aluminum, magnesium reacts violently with water so it's not a

traditional firefighting effort, we can't just put water on it and put it out. So we have to use dry chemicals or we have to remove the oxygen from the fire. So that's very challenging," DeWitt said.

The workers at the Dicastal North American plant produce aluminum alloy wheels for multiple automakers under the "just-in-time" process aimed at cutting costs and slashing jobs.

The explosion quickly impacted the supply chain. Workers at the GM Lansing Delta Assembly Plant reported Wednesday they were sent home early because of a parts shortage. Workers only found out about the explosion in Greenville through Facebook posts.

According to MIOSHA, Dicastal had nine safety violations since 2019. These violations included health, safety and injury cases with fines totaling \$26,800, all reduced from their initial penalties.

In 2019, firefighters responded to another fire that ignited in the baghouse on the outside of the plant. The company in response set up a special safety promotion among workers. In 2014 a similar explosion took place injuring 186 and killing 71 workers at the Kunshan Zhongrong Metal Products Company plant, a plant used by Dicastal. The cause of the explosion was an exposed flame in a room filled with combustible dust. Like the accident in Greenville, the dangerous conditions were known for years.

A week prior to the explosion, Health & Safety Supervisor Shawn Enbody reported that there was "a minor preventative maintenance in our Paint department. The equipment overheated and produced smoke. As an extra precautionary measure, we made the decision to evacuate employees from the building and call the fire department. The smoke was mitigated quickly, and everyone was able to return to work safely. Our priority is always the health and safety of

our employees and community, so we make sure to err on the side of caution when an incident occurs.”

It was later determined upon arrival of Greenville Public Safety that ductwork used to remove paint fumes and debris came into “contact with more oxygen than it was supposed to,” causing a spike in temperature.

Reviews have been left online by workers exposing the conditions at Dicastal. “They play favorites and pick and choose who gets positions based on popularity not performance. They fire some on the spot but keep others regardless of behavior,” one worker stated. “The worst place I’ve ever worked. It’s the closest thing to slave labor in the United States. The Chinese company is only half the problem. The office personnel might be worse than the Chinese at screwing their employees. Wouldn’t recommend this job to my worst enemy. I wasted a 1 year 9 months, the best thing I ever did was leave there. I quit for a better job opportunity, they took all my last check saying I didn’t earn any [paid time off] in 5 months. Any person that gave this place a five star review was paid or works in the office.

“You work in Plant 2, you have at least a chance of 1 in 365 of working there when building catches fire or blows up.”

In January, the external dust collecting system at the plant caught fire. When public safety arrived, an explosion within the dust collecting system caused hot dust to be thrown into the air, returning to the ground and setting the roof on fire. “From the dust coming down that was on fire, it hit that roof that was rubber and melted through,” Blomstrom stated. “It then got into the ceiling joist and the roof membrane.” While no injuries were reported in this particular incident, it is symptomatic of the daily risks workers face.

About 30 miles away in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Moses Kur died at the Ventra auto parts plant in 2021. This was the same group of parts facilities responsible for the deaths of Wanda Holbrook, Ricky Dora and Stephan Eiler.

In another tragedy, last week OSHA fined BP Products North America \$156,250 for the deaths of two workers in September 2022. Ben and Max Morrissey, two brothers, ages 32 and 34, were burned to death in an explosion and fire at the BP Husky oil refinery in Oregon, Ohio, just outside of Toledo. In February, 25 year-old Alfredo Reyes was killed constructing

scaffolding at the Marathon Galveston Bay Refinery. As the *World Socialist Web Site* stated, “For American capitalism, the life of a worker is very cheap.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact