Detroit EV plant fire cost GM reported $1.3 million in damages

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The intense fire at GM's flagship Factory Zero electric vehicle plant on the Detroit-Hamtramck border in December caused $1.3 million in damages and exposed scores of Detroit firefighters to toxic smoke according to recent reports. One firefighter was injured fighting the fire. All plant employees were evacuated.

More details have emerged about the blaze, which raged for seven hours inside the new, state-of-the-art facility that produces the electric Hummer SUV and pickup truck and the Chevy Silverado EV pickup truck. According to press reports, content losses at Factory Zero were estimated at $1 million, while property losses were estimated to be $300,000. These amounts do not count the cost of actually fighting the fire or the cancellation of production shifts.

In the wake of the blaze the Detroit chief of fire prevention, Dennis Hunter, said the constant fires at the factory were "taxing" the resources of the already undermanned department.

The fire started when a fork truck hit a pallet of lithium ion batteries near a loading dock. The resulting blaze created highly toxic smoke that quickly filled the plant, forcing the shutdown of production. All of the firefighters who responded, as many as 100, were exposed to the fumes. The fire was the eighth run that the Detroit fire department had made to the plant since summer.

There is an acute lack of safety protocols for dealing with fires involving lithium ion batteries, which power most electric vehicles as well as many consumer electronic products. These fires burn hotter and faster than those involving other materials and are harder to extinguish. One danger is "thermal runaway," a rapid and unstoppable increase in temperature in EV batteries that can lead to fires that are hard to put out and that can re-ignite.

"It is a drain on our resources if we have four, eight or 12 fire apparatuses at their location, depending on the size of the fire, which is why we are working with them to have a better internal protocol for handling these electric vehicle batteries," Hunter told *Crain's Detroit Business*.

Detroit firefighters initially had a hard time finding the fire and had to waste precious time searching the plant while deadly smoke continued to billow. Plant management apparently had no emergency procedures or trained personnel in place to provide direction.

In comparison to the multiple fires at Factory Zero there were no fire runs reported in all of 2023 to the much larger Stellantis Detroit Assembly Complex, which builds gas-powered vehicles on the east side of Detroit.

The hazards of lithium ion batteries are well known. However, the auto companies have seemingly paid little attention to safety in their drive to increase output and profits, putting both workers and consumers at risk.

Recently, General Motors decided to halt all production of the Chevrolet Bolt EV due to a spate of battery fires.

The National Highway Traffic and Safety Commission is investigating multiple complaints about fires in the 2017-18 Chrysler Pacifica plug-in hybrids. The vehicles had supposedly been repaired in an earlier recall.

In December, a fire broke out on a cargo ship carrying lithium ion batteries from Vietnam to Dutch Harbor, Alaska. The fire started in the cargo hold where

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the batteries were stowed. While the cause of the fire has not been officially reported, Dutch broadcaster RTL released a recording where an emergency responder said the fire started in the battery of an electric car.

The production of batteries is also hazardous. Workers face exposure from a witches' brew of hazardous chemicals, often with few or inadequate protections on the part of companies eager to cut costs. In October, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration cited Ultium Cells in Warren, Ohio, the joint venture between GM and South Korea-based LG Energy Solution, for 17 serious safety violations. Workers have reported being directly exposed to dangerous chemicals, including one worker who was sprayed in the face with toxic electrolyte and suffered difficulty breathing.

Workers who produce standard car batteries also face hazards, including lead poisoning and heightened risk of cancer.

During its campaign to secure union recognition at the Ultium Cells plant, which supplies batteries to Factory Zero, the United Auto Workers attempted to leverage the issue of worker safety as part of its pitch to the Biden administration and corporate management that unionization would provide a more stable workforce. The UAW leadership under President Shawn Fain warned of growing worker discontent, reflected in high turnover, in the face of unsafe conditions.

As part of its strategy of using the union apparatus to suppress the class struggle, the Biden administration pressed GM to put its joint venture EV battery plants under the UAW's master contract, ensuring a continued flow of dues to the UAW bureaucracy. The deals have resulted in a small increase in the poverty wages of the workers at these plants, with the 1,110 workers at the Ultium plant in Lordstown, Ohio, getting an increase from $16.50 an hour to a $26.91 maximum, with lower starting wages.

In an interview with Bloomberg Businessweek, Fain made it clear the UAW's chief concern was securing a steady supply of cheap labor for these modern-day sweatshops. "If a worker is not going to leave their house to work at McDonald's for $15 an hour and make burgers and fries," he said, "why the hell are they going to go in some battery factory and be exposed to chemicals that make them vomit and pass out?"

The UAW bureaucracy used a reportedly large vote by Ultium workers in favor of its deal with GM to declare a narrow ratification of 55 percent for its contract with GM nationally. GM workers have raised challenges to the legitimacy of the results, given that Ultium workers were not GM employees at the time they voted on the contract.

As soon as the national agreements at GM, Ford and Stellantis were rammed through by Fain, the UAW predictably dropped the issue of safety.

Over a month since the fire and evacuation at Factory Zero, the UAW has yet to issue a statement, despite the potential exposure of the more than 1,800 workers at the plant. There has been no public acknowledgment by GM management or its UAW "partners" over the extent of the threat to workers posed by the fire or if the health of employees potentially exposed to toxic fumes is being monitored.

The alarming extent of the unknown risks posed to workers' health due to the transition to EV production underscores the call by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees for "Rank-and-file control over line speed and production standards, to be negotiated by local rank-and-file committees, to ensure that workers' health and safety comes first."

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