

Two injured in massive fire, explosion at Michigan auto parts plant

By Tom Hall
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Early last Wednesday morning, a massive fire ripped through an auto parts plant with a history of safety violations in Eaton Rapids, Michigan, setting off a series of explosions throughout the facility and injuring two workers.

The Meridian Magnesium plant, which produces instrument panel components for the major auto corporations, is located 18 miles south of the state capital of Lansing. The magnesium handled at the plant is a durable but dangerously flammable metal highly reactive to water. Because of this, firefighters responding to the scene were unable to douse the flames and were forced to allow it to eventually burn itself out.

No official explanation for the cause of the fire has yet been given because investigators have been blocked by debris from entering the area of the plant where the fire was likely to have begun. However, government officials have said the fire probably started in an area of the plant called “the tunnel,” where magnesium is loaded on a conveyor belt to be melted down in a smelter, according to the *Lansing State Journal*.

Aerial drone footage taken the following day showed scorch marks running up and down the roof of the facilities, with one entire area of the plant having collapsed completely. One city official called it a “miracle” that only two out of the 150 workers on site at the time were injured. They have both since been released from the hospital after being treated for relatively minor injuries.

The family of one of the injured workers, speaking to the *Lansing State Journal*, said that an explosion “blew him out of the side [of the plant] through the doors” after he tried re-entering the building to make sure everyone had safely evacuated. “And everybody made it out, but it’s pretty tragic,” the worker’s father added,

holding back tears. “There are 700 jobs involved, you know? A lot of lives disrupted.”

The plant is the largest employer in Eaton Rapids, a small town of 5,000. Management called a meeting with workers last Thursday to announce that the workforce would shoulder the financial burden of the explosion in the form of layoffs. Workers were told they would be paid only for Wednesday and Thursday, with the option to take paid time off on Friday. Workers who spoke to the local press said that some workers who are not being assigned to cleanup duties at the plant are being transferred to other Meridian facilities, including in Ontario, Canada. Many others said they had already begun filing for unemployment.

However, the company plans to re-open the undamaged parts of the plant as early as today, even as fire investigators and damage cleanup workers continue to comb through the destroyed portion of the facility.

The company is under immense pressure to resume production. The explosion has wreaked havoc on supply chains throughout the United States, with local press and autoworkers on Facebook reporting temporary layoffs at several plants from Kansas City to Tuscaloosa, Alabama due to a lack of components. Meridian produces components for many of the largest auto companies, including the Detroit Three—Ford, General Motors and Chrysler—as well as European “transplants” such as Audi and Mercedes-Benz, which operate assembly plants throughout the southern United States.

The Meridian Magnesium plant has a history of safety violations and accidents, and workers and nearby residents described fires at the facility as commonplace. “I would’ve assumed it would’ve blown up three years ago,” a former employee who left in 2015 over safety concerns told a local television

station.

Fires are common at the plant, he said, because management throws employees into dangerous tasks without adequate training. “They put whoever and whenever they can on a machine, those people don’t know what’s going on. Supervisors are not around so sometimes something goes wrong and there is nobody to ask for help.

“There’s suds on the walls, on the machine, on the floor, the floors are slippery from magnesium exploding and being on the floor. It’s like a skating rink.” The worker added that “they tell us that it’s nothing, there’s no issue, OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] has approved everything that is going on in there.”

According to OSHA’s website, Meridian Magnesium Products of America was cited for seven safety violations between 2014 and 2016, including four classified as “serious.” The company was ultimately fined only \$6700 for all of the incidents combined.

Workers on the employer review site Glassdoor.com described a plant regime of extreme overwork and safety negligence by management. “You will be worked 7 days a week for months and months with not one day off. They do not give family time ANY consideration. Dirty shop. Horrible heat. The decision-makers aren’t even on the floor to experience the consequences of decisions they are making,” one worker commented. “The atmosphere is as a shop was in the 1800s. Stop working your floor/machine employees like dogs. STOP.”

“There is nothing good about this place,” one worker said in a post from 2012. “They work you like slaves for little compensation. The ‘management’ is making record profits and the employees are getting little to no raises.”

Wednesday’s fire comes amidst a rash of injuries and safety incidents in the automobile industry. Only two days later, a female worker on the night shift at Ford’s Flat Rock assembly plant was injured on the line, prompting other workers on the shift to walk out in anger and disgust. Nationwide, there were more than 13,000 workplace-related injuries and illnesses in auto manufacturing in 2016, the last year for which OSHA records are available.

The Meridian plant is a non-union facility. Nevertheless, the sweatshop conditions that prevail in

the auto parts industry are primarily the responsibility of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union. In the 1980s and 1990s, the UAW deliberately isolated and betrayed a series of strikes in the parts industry in order to lower costs and boost the profits of the Detroit-based auto corporations.

Auto parts workers who previously had made up to 80 percent of the wages of workers at Ford, GM and Chrysler suffered a drastic reduction in wages and conditions. Between 2003 and 2013, auto parts workers saw a 14 percent decline in real wages, three times faster than for manufacturing as a whole.

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