

Workers at Ford's Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan denounce "horrible" conditions in the aftermath of the death of co-worker Khaled Nasser

Tim Rivers
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Khaled Nasser, an electrician at a steel mill at Cleveland Cliff's Dearborn Works near Detroit, was pronounced dead at the scene Friday morning when he slipped over the guardrail of a catwalk during regular maintenance on a Basic Oxygen Furnace and fell 50 feet to the concrete. He was pronounced dead at the scene. Nasser was 50 years old.

The Dearborn Works, part of Ford's massive Rouge manufacturing complex, was spun off by the automaker in 1989. Cleveland Cliffs took over the facility after acquiring the previous operator, AK Steel, last year.

Nasser's identity was initially withheld by the United Auto Workers union and the company, but later released over the weekend in response to the massive outpouring on Facebook of solidarity, sorrow and condolences that followed the announcement of his death. Both he and his family are well known and loved among co-workers and friends in the area. Of Yemeni background, Mr. Nasser's death is being widely mourned in the large and tightly-knit Arab-American community in Dearborn.

A co-worker's wife wrote, "This is so sad, my husband said he was a nice guy. He was an electrician at the BOF. Our condolences go out to his family, they are in our thoughts and prayers."

"Condolences to all the family in Memory of our Brother Steelworker," added another worker. A friend added, "He was such a good man who loved life, always smiling and always talked about his family. He will be missed." Hundreds of people added to the stream of deeply felt condolences.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with electricians who work in the complex about the conditions that led to Mr. Nasser's death. One had worked in that area before

Ford sold it to Severstall and then Cleveland Cliffs/AK Steel. "It's just horrible," he said. "Your sight distance is limited."

A by-product of the BOF process, in which oxygen is forced into hot molten iron converting it into steel, is a dense and blinding smog, he said. "You can't see the ground below the catwalks, and the railings are not high enough to prevent a fall." There are no safety cables to tie off to. This is a standard requirement for high hazard areas, but has been ignored by the companies who operate the furnaces, the union and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration inspectors who inevitably visit the facility in the aftermath of a fatality.

Mr. Nasser was a member of UAW Local 600, which issued a perfunctory statement of condolences. But Rouge workers who spoke to the WSWWS did not even know if the workers in the steel plant still had a union, because "they are never around and they don't do anything."

"Anytime someone dies on the job it's sad," added a colleague. "We are upset even if we don't know the man personally. It was absolutely unnecessary."

The Rouge blast furnaces began production in May 1920. Hot metal was used to cast engine blocks, cylinder heads, intake and exhaust manifolds for the Model T's that were assembled at the company's historic Highland Park plant.

By 1927 the Rouge complex had grown into the largest factory in the world at the time. It included 93 structures, 90 miles of railroad tracks, 27 miles of conveyors, 53,000 machine tools and 75,000 employees. The feverish industrial expansion which had begun at the outset of World War I would continue until the end of World War II, when the complex employed more than 100,000

workers.

Today, after decades of layoffs, Rouge is a shadow of the massive industrial complex it once was. The workforce now consists of only 6,000 workers.

The pro-corporate website www.fundinguniverse.com describes the process by which the company introduced pay cuts, fob cuts and the erosion of safety and other concessions at the steel plant:

“In the summer of 1982, a consortium of Japanese companies under the leadership of Nippon Kokan (NKK) began negotiations with Ford for the purchase of Rouge Steel ... Talks between Ford and NKK collapsed in 1983, however, because the Japanese wanted to reduce Rouge’s labor costs. Workers at Rouge Steel—organized under the UAW rather than the U.S. Steelworkers because of Rouge Steel’s origin within Ford Motor—maintained an hourly rate of pay almost \$5 higher than the U.S. industry standard.

“Following the failed talks with NKK, officials at UAW Local 600 began to negotiate with Ford over proposed wage reductions at Rouge Steel,” the pro-company analysts continue. “Philip Caldwell [then-president of Ford] had announced that Ford Motor was suffering its worst economic downturn since the Great Depression: in the four years preceding 1983, Ford had lost \$2.1 billion and had eliminated 67,000 workers from a workforce of 158,000. Clearly, operations at the Rouge had to change, and meetings between Caldwell and UAW Local 600 president Michael Rinaldi in the summer of 1983 resulted in wage and benefit reductions for Rouge Steel workers.”

The UAW has long since given up defending safe working conditions. On the contrary, the joint corporate/union safety committees which were initiated during the Chrysler bailout in the late 1970’s and subsequently spread throughout the industry became a model across all industries for transforming the union into a corporatist police force for company management on the shop floor.



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