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FUEL CELL COVER PLATE TIE-DOWN

TECHNICAL FIELD

Cover plates on fuel cell stacks, which may be either protective covers or fluid manifolds, are drawn into sealing relationship with the stack by means of one or more tensioning lines, such as cables, applying tension between structure on the cover plate, such as pins, or between structure on the cover plate and structure on an adjacent end plate of the fuel cell stack.

BACKGROUND ART

A fuel cell stack, part of a fuel cell power plant known to the prior art, is illustrated in FIG. 1. The fuel cell stack 7 includes a pressure or end plate 8, a fuel inlet/outlet manifold 9, a fuel turn manifold 10, and air/coolant inlet/outlet manifold 11 and an air turn manifold 12. The manifolds 9-12 are sealed to the edges of the fuel cells 14 and the edges of the pressure plate 8 by means of foam gaskets, silicone rubber, and possibly other components, examples of which are shown in U.S. Pat. No. 7,112,384. The pressure plates are drawn together by tie rods 15, as is known the manifolds are pressed to the stack by load cables or straps 17. The air/coolant manifolds experience leakage near the center line of the stack 18 because the manifolds have a low profile (that is, a low top-to-bottom height as seen in FIG. 1) and are therefore not stiff enough to counter the seal preload and stack pressure loads, thereby deflecting enough to leak in the center.

In motor vehicle applications, the volume of the fuel cell power plant is severely limited so that the size of the manifolds as well as any corrective equipment, such as clamps is highly restricted.

SUMMARY

Structures extending outwardly from ends of fuel cell cover plates, such as protective covers and fluid manifolds, engage at least one tensioning line for drawing the cover plate into secure engagement with the fuel cell stack. The structures may be pins which have grooves, somewhat like pulleys, so as to retain the tensioning line, or lips, ledges, extensions, etc. The tensioning line may be joined into a complete loop by an adjustable tensioning device, with a lock to hold the adjustment, once made.

The tensioning line may draw structures of one cover plate toward structures of a similar cover plate on an opposite side or adjacent sides of the stack, or the tensioning line may draw a structure on a cover plate toward a guide disposed on the fuel cell stack itself, such as on an end plate.

Apparatus for binding a cover plate, such as a protective cover or a fluid manifold, to a stack in a fuel cell power plant has a very low volume, provides no increase in volume to a fuel cell power plant, does not impede access to other components mounted on the fuel cell stack, requires minimum machining, is easy to assemble and to retrofit onto existing fuel cell stacks, and may apply an easily adjusted clamping force.

The structures do not increase the overall length of the fuel cell stack because they are located between gas and water inlet and outlet pipes which extend outwardly from the fuel cell stack. The clamping force is easily adjustable by a turnbuckle. The line may comprise plastic or plastic coated wire rope, thereby providing a measure of electrical insulation with respect to adjoining parts. If desired, the tensioning line can be tailored to allow pressure relief in response to detonation events.

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Other variations will become apparent in the light of the following detailed description of exemplary embodiments, as illustrated in the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a fragmentary, partially broken away, simplified, stylized, perspective view of a fuel cell stack having manifolds which may leak.

FIG. 2 is a fragmentary, partially broken away, simplified, stylized, perspective view of a fuel cell stack having pins and a tensioning line to bind the manifolds tightly to the stack.

FIG. 3 is a partially sectioned, side elevation view of a turnbuckle and cable.

FIG. 4 is a fractional perspective view of a pin for use in the configuration of FIG. 2.

FIG. 5 is a simplified line drawing of the arrangement in FIG. 2.

FIG. 6 is a simplified line drawing of the arrangement described with respect to FIG. 7.

FIG. 7 is a simplified, stylized perspective view of a short fuel cell stack having all of the manifolds sealed to the stack by a single tensioning line on each end of the stack.

FIGS. 8-13 are simplified line drawings of other exemplary arrangements of tensioning line 23 and structures 22 which may be utilized when appropriate.

FIG. 14 is a fragmentary, simplified, stylized perspective view of a fuel cell stack in which the tensioning line is looped around structures which comprise extensions of a manifold lip.

FIG. 15 is a fragmentary, partially broken away, simplified, stylized, perspective view of a fuel cell stack illustrating that the tensioning line may be a strap.

FIG. 16 is a fragmentary, simplified, stylized perspective view of a fuel cell stack illustrating that cover plates other than manifolds may be drawn to the stack by means of tensioning lines looped around structures, such as extensions of protective covers.

MODE(S) OF IMPLEMENTATION

Referring to FIG. 2, four structures comprise grooved pins 22 which are bonded into holes provided in the ends 19, 20 of the manifolds 11, 12; a tensioning line comprises a cable 23 wrapped around the pins 22 and closing upon itself at a tensioning device which comprises a turnbuckle 24 with a locknut 25.

The structures (pins) may be located wherever there is room for them and the tensioning line (cable) without interfering with other parts of the fuel cell stack. In fact the pins or other structures on one end of the stack do not have to be symmetrically aligned with the pins or other structures on the other end of the stack; the pins may be closer together on one end of the stack than they are on the other end of the stack. Similarly, pins or other structures on a cover plate need not be symmetrical with guides, pins or other structures to which they are to be drawn by a tensioning line.

If desired, and if proper spacing and clearance can be provided without interference with other apparatus on the pressure plates 8, the invention may be practiced utilizing a single pin 22 extending outwardly from the end of each related manifold; however, a pair of pins are preferred to provide adequate clearance for the turnbuckle for simple adjustment of the tension in the cable.

The turnbuckle 24 and lock nut 25 are illustrated in more detail in FIG. 3. The clamping cable 23 comprises a wire cable 30 with insulation 31 thereon. A collar 34 is crimped