

Profit before people: 16 workers die in Chinese factory fire

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A tragedy is repeated time and again in the sweatshops of Asia: highly inflammable materials, the lack of elementary fire safety measures and a blaze that kills workers who are trapped with no means of escape.

The latest occurred on Saturday in the Chinese industrial city of Shenzhen, adjacent to Hong Kong. According to Chinese news reports, 16 people—12 women and four men—died when a fire broke out at around 5.25 pm on the first floor of the Zhimao Electronics Plant. Another eight people are reported to be seriously injured.

The blaze engulfed packaging materials for electric fans and rapidly spread to the other floors. Even though firefighters were quickly on the scene, they took over an hour to put it out. More than 100 workers were stranded in the four-storey building and firemen had to use ladders to rescue 58 workers trapped on the top floor.

The factory managers responded to the fire by ordering workers to “save materials” rather than their endangered colleagues. Clearly uppermost in the managers' minds were the company's potential financial losses. Under conditions where tens, if not hundreds, of millions are unemployed or underemployed in China's cities and rural expanses, workers are easily replaceable.

The 16 dead workers suffocated in heavy smoke. According to a report in the *South China Morning Post*, “Witnesses interviewed by Guangdong television said the workers were unable to escape because the windows were sealed by metal screens to prevent theft.”

The Governor of Guangdong Province Lu Ruihua has ordered an investigation. The factory managers have been questioned but no charges have been laid and no arrests made. It is conceivable, though unlikely, that the

state-run media and bureaucracy may make an example out of someone for their own political purposes—for instance, to make play of the fact that the plant was established by investors from rival Taiwan.

What is certain, however, is that no official investigation will probe into the real causes of these repeated disasters: the ubiquitous character of the atrocious working conditions, barred windows, shoddy construction, lack of fire escapes, hoses, extinguishers, sprinkler systems and procedures, all of which is sanctioned by the Stalinist bureaucracy and the state-run trade unions at the local, provincial and national levels.

On May 10, 1993, the worst industrial fire in history took place outside Bangkok in Thailand. Officially, 188 workers, mostly young women, died in the Kader Industrial toy factory after they were trapped behind jammed doors in a building without fire escapes. The police investigation sought to make a single worker the scapegoat for the tragedy. The managers, building inspectors, government officials, trade unions and politicians all got off scot-free. After a pitiful compensation package was paid to the victims and their families, it was business as usual for investors in Thailand.

Like the latest fire in Shenzhen, the Bangkok blaze hardly rated a mention in the international media.

Purchase *Industrial Inferno: The Story of the Thai Toy Factory Fire* from Mehring Books Online



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