

At least 11 dead in building collapse in southern China

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At least 11 people were killed and 32 injured when a shopping centre collapsed on December 1 in Chiling village located on the outskirts of Dongguan, a densely populated industrial city neighbouring the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in southern China, just one hour's drive from Hong Kong.

There are numerous reports in the Chinese media indicating that the death toll is far higher than the official tally of 11. China Central Television claimed that a man had been shown 11 bodies before identifying his relative. A building worker told *Yangcheng Evening News* that of the 60 men working on the site at the time, he saw only 20 escape. As well as the workers, it is believed that at least 200 others were inside the building when it caved in.

The *South China Morning Post* commented: "The most serious charge is that Dongguan officials covered up the number killed in the accident, with some even alleging that dozens of bodies still lie under the rubble."

Many workers in the areas around the Special Economic Zones are migrants from the rural provinces and lack correct residency papers, so it is unlikely the true number killed in Chiling will ever be known.

Despite the number of people unaccounted for, Dongguan authorities ordered cranes to level the centre within an hour of the collapse that occurred around 2pm. By the end of the day, up to 10 cranes were working on the site. The area was reopened to the public just 24 hours after the collapse. One relative denounced the use of heavy machinery as "barbaric".

Authorities have offered compensation of 30,000 yuan (\$US3,600) to the families of the deceased, on the condition that they forfeit their right to sue. Those injured were initially offered compensation of 200 to 500 yuan (\$US30-70), less than one month's average

pay.

The collapse was directly caused by illegal construction of two additional stories to the one-storey building, in order to generate more rent for the local officials who controlled the shopping centre. Investigators believe that the building's foundations, which had been laid over a drainage ditch, subsided under the extra weight. The construction had not been given official approval and neither the architect nor the building contractor held licenses.

Four men have been detained over the disaster: the village head of Chiling, building contractor Ye Manlin, architect Wu Xin and labour contractor Huang Punshen.

The shopping centre was constructed 10 years ago with village funds and on village land, so ownership ultimately belonged to the village committee. In reality, as is the case throughout the country, both the land and other "collective" property was exploited by local Communist Party officials for their own private gain.

Before the collapse, some 19 businessmen, mainly from Hong Kong and Taiwan, leased the stores within the building, paying a monthly rent of 1,000 yuan (\$US120) directly to the Chiling village head and his associates. In their pursuit of even greater profits, the local officials started to add the extra stories with complete disregard for elementary safety standards.

The building collapse at Chiling is just one tragic example of the consequences of free market deregulation and foreign direct investment in China over the last 20 years. Substantial segments of the state bureaucracy have transformed themselves into capitalist entrepreneurs and are seeking to amass wealth as rapidly as possible.

The process is most advanced in the southern provinces opposite Hong Kong where Special

Economic Zones like Shenzhen were established to facilitate foreign investment. The anarchic growth in Shenzhen and surrounding areas, which has transformed what was a small fishing village in 1979 into an industrial and commercial city of four million, has produced some of the deadliest results of “market reform” in the country.

The limited building and safety regulations that exist are routinely flouted. Tens of thousands of Chinese workers have been killed or maimed in industrial accidents, fires or the collapse of buildings and infrastructure. Just one week before the Chiling disaster, another 19 people were injured in Shenzhen when a bridge collapsed.

While Beijing regularly calls for the culprits in such cases to be punished, the central government is responsible for, and profits from, the free market policies that have put the accumulation of wealth ahead of the most elementary requirements of working people.



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