Thai toy factory fire: 10 years after the world's worst industrial inferno

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On May 10, ten years ago, the worst factory fire in history took place at the Kader Industrial toy factory on the outskirts of the Thai capital of Bangkok. Officially 188 workers, most of them young women from impoverished rural families, died in the blaze. Another 469 were injured; many seriously and permanently, after they were forced to leap from second, third and fourth floors of the buildings to avoid being burnt to death.

Hundreds of workers were packed into each of the three buildings that collapsed. There were no fire extinguishers, no alarms, no sprinkler systems and the elevated walkways between the buildings were either locked or used as storage areas. The buildings themselves were death traps, constructed from un-insulated steel girders that buckled and gave way in less than 15 minutes. Those who attempted to flee through the narrow ground floor exits found them jammed shut.

There were many reactions to this terrible tragedy. The international media barely mentioned the fire. Inside Thailand, however, there was widespread anger. The toy factory, owned by Thai, Hong Kong and Taiwanese investors, was symbolic of the exploitation associated with globalised production. Major toy corporations such as Tyco, Kenner and Arco faxed their orders to Kader, complete with the detailed specifications required to market the goods in the US and Europe. None of them had the slightest interest, however, in the safety standards, wages or conditions for the factory workers who produced the plastic-moulded toys.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) recognised the significance of the disaster and dispatched a reporting team to Thailand to investigate. A series of articles, which initially appeared in the newspapers of the ICFI and was later published as a book *Industrial Inferno: The story of the Thai Toy Factory Fire*, detailed the immediate causes of the fire, allowed survivors and the victims' families to speak, and exposed the official cover-up and the inaction of various trade union leaders.

More fundamentally, the articles pointed to the underlying changes in world capitalist economy that made such tragedies inevitable. The previous worst industrial fire—at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York in 1911—became the focus for struggles by working people that succeeded in placing limited restraints on the operations of capital. But under conditions where globally mobile investors were not tied to a particular country, let alone to one factory, the prospects for such piecemeal reform had become nil.

> Companies such as Kader Holdings need to move their operations rapidly to take advantage of the newest areas of low-cost labour. That it why the Kader factory outside Bangkok was never intended to be a permanent structure. Cheap shoddy buildings, which failed to meet even the minimal Thai construction requirements, were simply packed to overflowing with workers and machines. Elementary safety precautions were deemed to be unnecessary overheads.
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> Thailand's limited building and safety codes, minimal wage levels and factory regulations are not enforced. Indeed, the government in Thailand attracts foreign capital to its shores by openly advertising the lack of restrictions on the exploitation of workers. The Kader factory was no aberration. All the horrors of nineteenth century European capitalism—child labour, dirty and unsafe working conditions, shanty housing—are on display everywhere in Bangkok. [1]

In contrast to those often well-meaning groups and individuals in Thailand and elsewhere who argued that it was necessary to pressure governments for change, the ICFI concluded that the working class could only make advances to the extent that it grounded its struggles on a global perspective aimed at abolishing the capitalist system of exploitation.

> In semi-colonial countries such as Thailand, the working class has no hope of gradually improving its conditions, as was the case in the United States, following the Triangle Shirtwaist fire in 1911. From the outset, the hundreds of thousands of peasant youth drawn from the poverty-stricken regions of Thailand to labour in the factories of Bangkok face the necessity of developing a unified strategy with workers in neighbouring Indochina, China and around the globe. [2]

What has been the balance sheet of the last 10 years?

Far from improving, a decade later the conditions facing workers in Thailand and other Asian countries have significantly worsened. The myths of the Asian economic miracle collapsed in the 1997-98

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financial crisis, which threw millions into unemployment and poverty overnight and vastly increased competition for foreign investment. The former Asian "tigers" vie with each other in an obscene contest to demonstrate to global corporations that theirs is the cheapest, most disciplined and convenient workforce.

The level of industrial accidents has continued to rise throughout the region. Last year the International Labour Organisation lifted its estimate of work-related deaths from 1.2 million annually to 2.3 million. Of these, half take place in Asia, with nearly half a million in China alone.

In Thailand, 10 years of pleading with government officials and politicians for minimal factory safeguards have produced nothing. Various trade unions, non-government organisations (NGOs) and labour activists have pinned their hopes on the establishment of an Institute for Occupational Health and Safety funded by the government but operated with their input. Plans for the institute are currently languishing in parliament, with no sign that they will be approved in the near future.

Even if such an institute were to materialise, its impact would be negligible. Government and private corporations would treat it with the same contempt that they have meted out to the victims of the Kader fire over the past decade. No major changes have taken place in the government departments responsible for factory safety in Thailand. Nor have any of the senior officials directly involved in approving the Kader factory's construction or overseeing its operations been prosecuted.

A comment in the *Nation* newspaper on May 1 noted: "Safety and environment standards in the factories are generally low. A senior official admits that only 10,000 plus factories can be inspected each year while there are 300,000 factories nationwide. Meanwhile, a wishful foreign labour expert said this was a good reason for organising more unions to ensure occupational health and safety. But then with union membership stalled at 3 percent for a decade now, what is to be done?"

The Thai legal system has finally rendered its verdict on the Kader fire. Immediately after the blaze, one of the factory workers was made the scapegoat. Police arrested Viroj Yusak, alleging that he had caused the fire by carelessly discarding a cigarette. A court in Nakhom Pathom last month sentenced him to 10 years jail but acquitted 14 executives, including the factory's managing director, an engineer and a shareholder, of all charges. The only legal recognition of Kader Industrial's culpability was a fine of 520,000 baht ($US12,300).

Charoen Phokphand Group (CP)—the largest business conglomerate in Thailand with tentacles in many different ventures—initially denied any involvement in, or responsibility for, the Kader fire. Under pressure from the victims, their families and supporters, CP was eventually forced to acknowledge its connection to the factory and to pay minimal compensation.

A decade later the money is drying up, leaving many of those affected by the fire in poverty. Sampan Tochalerm, 46, who was paralysed from the waist down, has used up her 200,000 baht ($US4,740) in compensation and her 2,000 baht monthly allowance will expire in another decade. She is worried that she will be left with nothing but the money she gets for medication to treat the sores that cover her body.

Carpenter Sukhon Lamchoom, 51, told the *Nation* that the baht in aid that he received after the death of his wife in the Kader fire went to pay for her funeral. Since then he has faced financial difficulties, as his wife was the main breadwinner and he is forced to look after his son who is in poor health. Apart from odd jobs, he is reliant on his son's 1,800 baht monthly allowance.

The Thai-based NGO, Friends of Women Foundation, recently concluded a study of 59 families who lost members in the fire. Of the 92 children, 62 percent faced chronic financial and family problems. Although the government pledged at the time to waive school fees for the children of the victims, that has not taken place. A number of spouses admitted to regularly contemplating suicide.

Last Saturday a number of the survivors, the families of victims and other supporters gathered at the site of the Kader factory to mark the tenth anniversary of the tragedy. Labour Minister Suwat Liptapanlop, who turned up to the commemoration ceremony, had nothing to offer those in attendance other than his support for a proposal to set up a monument. "It should remind us of safety in the workplace," he tritely told his audience.

The experiences of Thai workers over the 10 years since the Kader fire have confirmed the futility of attempting to pressure ministers and governments to mitigate appalling conditions in the country's cheap labour sweatshops. More broadly the working class in every country—economically advanced, as well as backward—has confronted the collapse of all those parties and organisations that, in the past, claimed that the interests of workers could be advanced within the framework of a nationally regulated capitalist economy.

The chief lesson from the Kader fire for the working class in Thailand and internationally is the need for a new political perspective grounded on a conscious understanding of global economic processes that produced the tragedy. In every country, workers confront the same class enemy—globally mobile capital—and can only defend their rights by starting to unify their struggles internationally around a program aimed at establishing a world planned socialist economy.

Industrial Inferno: The story of the Thai Toy Factory Fire *is available for purchase from Mehring Books. It can also be ordered by contacting sales@mehring.com, sales@mehringbooks.co.uk in the UK or mehring@ozemail.com.au in Australia.*

Notes:

1. *Industrial Inferno: The story of the Thai Toy Factory Fire*, Peter Symonds, Labour Press Books 1997, pp. 58-59.
2. ibid, p. 63

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