

Silicosis deaths in Pondicherry, India

Women victims of lack of safety standards

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Within the past year, seven young women near the city of Pondicherry in southern India have lost their lives due to silicosis—an occupational lung-disease caused by inhalation of silica, a raw material used in glass manufacturing.

All of the women were workers at the local Ballarpur Industries Limited (BILT) Glass Containers factory near Pondicherry and lived in the nearby villages of Villianur and Arum-partha-puram. Many other women from these villages are also at various stages of this incurable disease. According to press reports, at least one woman in every household in the two villages has been afflicted with silicosis and suffers from chronic chest pain, cough, breathlessness and loss of appetite.

The BILT Glass Containers factory was commissioned with great fanfare in 1992. The Pondicherry Union Territory government hailed it as a boon to the local economy, stressing the tax revenue it would bring and the employment it would provide. In reality the factory has used mostly contract labor, obtained through local contractors, employing around 1,500 workers. The exploitation of these workers is brutal with daily wage rates of only rupees (Rs.) 14 to Rs. 24 (about \$0.30 to \$0.50 US!) for 8 to 12 hours of work. The workers have come from neighboring towns and villages, with men given the work of loading and unloading the raw materials while women are mostly employed in sifting silica in the sand plant.

The hazards of breathing in silica dust are well known and silicosis is preventable when proper safeguards are implemented at the workplace. Yet the workers were not provided with any kind of protection and the women working in the sand plant were totally oblivious to the danger of their breathing in silica dust.

Most of the young women who have died started working at the factory as children. India is said to have the largest numbers of children laborers in the world, with international aid organizations estimating the number at anywhere from 60 million to 100 million. These children are not only robbed of their childhood but are also at the mercy of their employers.

The compulsion of poverty facing poor working families, which gives rise to child labor, is amply demonstrated by the story of a young girl called Kavitha. She hailed from the village of Villianur and her parents, Sushila and Salvaraj, worked as day laborers in the construction industry. Their meager and intermittent earnings of 50 Indian rupees a day, approximately a single US dollar, was hardly sufficient to provide for both the education of their three young children and meals for their family. As a result, the family would often go to bed hungry.

In order to relieve this intolerable situation the eldest daughter, Kavitha, left school at 14 to seek employment. She obtained a job at the nearby BILT glass factory through a contractor and earned Rs 24 per day for 10 hours of work. A few years later, Kavitha's younger sister, Chitra, followed her sister's footsteps to the glass factory.

In 1998, four years after Kavitha joined the factory, she started suffering from terrible chest pain and body ache. Her condition deteriorated rapidly and by the middle of 1999 she started losing weight and was soon continually tormented by coughing. When she sought medical help, doctors misdiagnosed her illness as tuberculosis (TB) and she was directed to a hospital in Pondicherry. Unsurprisingly, the prescribed regimen of medicines and injections did not improve her health. In spite of her illness, she continued to work at the glass factory, unwittingly aggravating her illness.

One night in April 2002, Kavitha was rushed to the hospital when she developed acute breathing difficulty. She underwent an expensive surgical procedure costing the family a sum of Rs. 7,000. When her condition did not improve she underwent a second surgery. After 12 agonizing days, Kavitha finally succumbed to her illness and died at the age of 22. Her death certificate declared the cause of her death to be TB.

Shortly thereafter three of Kavitha's friends, who lived on the same street and worked at the glass factory, also succumbed to the disease and passed away. When an autopsy was performed on one of the deceased, Uma, the

cause of death was found to be silicosis.

The falseness of the myth that poor people callously force their children to work as a matter of choice is shown by the poignant remarks Uma's mother, Selvi, made to a reporter: "(Uma) was a good student, but I forced her to go to work for want of money to run the family. Hunger I am sure would have been better than losing my child."

The families are now deeply in debt as a result of the loans they took out to pay for care for their children. These loans amount to several times the amount earned by their children at the glass factory. They have not received compensation from either the government or the factory. The cruel disregard for the suffering of the workers and their families can be gleaned from the comments of the Pondicherry Commissioner of Labor, Mr. Rattan Singh, when he stated that "the reason for the death and the illness of women from the two villages will have to be investigated before we think of compensation."

Complicating matters, the glass factory has changed hands several times. Currently it is a part of the giant Hindustan National Glass and Industries Ltd. Not only does the new management forswear any responsibility to the workers and their families, but has even threaten to close the factory if the government imposes "unreasonable" demands. Rajan Salvi, the chief general manager of the now renamed Ace Glass Factory Ltd., points out unabashedly that closure of the factory will not only result in the loss of jobs but will also result in a big loss in tax revenue—of around Rs.190 million—to the government.

The single union representation at the factory is that of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-affiliated Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). It has waged no struggle against the deplorable working conditions at the plant, restricting its action to writing letters (one in 1998 and another in 1999) to the Pondicherry Labor Department.

The Indian Factories Act puts the onus of responsibility on factory owners to report (to government factory inspectors) any hazardous working conditions at their facilities. This is analogous to getting a fox to guard a hen house.

The 1984 Union Carbide Bhopal disaster—in which thousands died and tens of thousands of others were left with debilitating long-term illnesses—was a direct result of such callous and criminal policies on the part of the Indian Government. Even today, people in Bhopal are getting sick as a result of drinking contaminated groundwater due to seepage of leftover toxic waste at the Union Carbide site. The Union Carbide Corporation—now part of Dow Chemical—has refused to take any responsibility for cleaning up the site.

Although the Indian Factories Act spells out, in impressive detail, various rights to the Indian working class, in practice

the Indian government not only takes an indifferent attitude towards workers' health but colludes with private industry in hiding violations of existing legislation.

The unions which represent 28 million workers—or just 7 percent of an estimated workforce of 400 million (of whom 270 million are agricultural workers)—are, as the Pondicherry silicosis tragedy demonstrates, largely oblivious to workers' health and safety. All of them, including the ones allied with the Stalinist Communist parties, have embraced policies such as the privatization of previously state-owned enterprises under the guise of "modernization," with the concomitant result of a significant deterioration in working conditions. States governed by opposition parties such as the Congress Party and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) compete with each other to provide tax breaks and other benefits to attract both domestic and foreign capital, while at the same time eschewing any concern for workers' health and safety.

International organizations have estimated work-related deaths of around 150,000 each year in India along with 2 million new cases of occupational diseases. The occupational safety and health conditions in India are at best comparable to those that existed in late 19th century England or America. India has not ratified any of the International Labor Organization conventions dealing with health and safety of workers since 1990.

The domestic and multinational corporations fully exploit this disregard for health and safety of workers. In addition to making super profits on the back of the working class they haphazardly dump massive amounts of toxic substances doing long-term damage to the environment and public at large. This barbarity will be ended only when production is subordinated to the well-being of workers rather than workers' health and livelihoods being subordinated to the profits of big business.



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