Worst hospital fire in China since 1949

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A fire on December 16 in a major hospital in Liaoyuan, a city in China's northeastern Jilin province, killed at least 39 people and left over 180 injured.

Firefighters battled for more than five hours to put out the fire in the City Central Hospital—the largest in Liaoyuan. Some 5,000 square metres of the four-floor facility were destroyed. The official Xinhua newsagency reported that 24 bodies were found at the site, while another 15 people died on their way to or in other hospitals. All of the victims were patients.

The hospital had 235 patients when the blaze broke out. One witness told Xinhua: "I saw people jumping out of windows and many of them were injured." Xia Yong, a doctor, told *China Daily* that most of those who jumped from the third or fourth floor either died or suffered broken bones.

Chen Zhifu, a patient who jumped from the third floor and broke both legs, told the Sichuan-based *Huaxi Metropolitan News*: "I almost gave up hope. I couldn't open my eyes and I couldn't breathe. I had to jump. If I didn't jump, I would have burnt to death."

Dozens of patients escaped by climbing down knotted bed sheets. In desperation, nurses threw a 12-day-old infant out of the window of the second floor maternity ward into the arms of his father, who luckily caught him and saved the baby's life.

As in other recent disasters, government leaders rushed to the scene to oversee rescue operations. Chinese health minister Gao Qiang described the fire as "the most disastrous one" in medical facilities since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949.

Predictably, the state launched a cosmetic "safety" campaign in the city. The family of each of the 39 victims will only receive 100,000 yuan ($US12,300) compensation. This is, however, only half of the official amount paid to the family of a coal miner killed in an industrial accident.

In marked contrast to the government's indifference, ordinary people responded with an outpouring of sympathy and assistance. Hundreds of people, from teenage students to retirees, queued in freezing temperatures to donate blood for the injured. Taxi drivers helped to take the injured to other hospitals and delivered blood donors back to their homes.

In just the last month, two major industrial disasters have taken place in northeastern China. An explosion at a chemical plant on November 13 spilled a hundred tonnes of benzene into the Songhua River and potentially affecting the health of millions of people in both China and Russia. Two weeks later, on November 27, a massive explosion at a state-owned coalmine in Qitaihe killed over 170 workers.

Zhao Zhengqi, Communist Party secretary in Liaoyuan, apologised to city's residents on December 17 over the fire and pledged to improve safety in "coal mines and hospitals". The statement was no more than damage control. But the fact that the local party boss referred to hospital fires and mine accidents in the same breathe is revealing. He is obviously responding to a groundswell of popular resentment over the string of disasters that all stem from Beijing's program of market reform.

In the frenzied pursuit of profit, businesses throughout China frequently ignore or violate basic fire safety regulations. China's ministry of public security releasedfigures—nodoubtunderestimated—showingthat 222,000 fires were reported in the country during the first 11 months this year. The blazes killed 2,048 people, injured a further 2,080 and caused economic loses of $152 million. In many cases, the deaths and injuries were caused by the lack of fire extinguishers, emergency exits or alarms.

Fire safety standards in public hospitals are no better than in private companies. In 1990s, as part of its free market reforms, Beijing introduced the "user pays" principle into the health system. Hospitals no longer

function as a facility to serve the medical needs of society, but as an avenue to amass profits. The tragedy at Liaoyuan City Central Hospital is a graphic example of how safety standards have been compromised in the process.

The police and investigators allege the fire started in the electricity distribution room when an electrician named Zhang restored the hospital's power after a blackout without first checking the cause of the outage. The blaze engulfed the entire building in just 20 minutes mainly due to a recent renovation. Staff and patients complained that "excessive decorations" contributed to the rapid spread of the flames.

The death toll was exacerbated by the structure of the hospital itself—a confusing maze of wards, offices and departments. One patient told *China Daily*: "The hospital is like a labyrinth. It is easy to get lost in the hospital during the daytime, let alone to find the direction in darkness."

Both Zhang and head of the hospital's logistics department have been detained for "violation of operating rules". They are being made scapegoats, however, for a disaster that is ultimately the product of the privatisation and breakdown of China's public health system.

According to an investigation by Jilin's *Dongya Jinmao Xinwen (East Asian Economic & Trade News)* on December 16, the purpose of the renovation last July and August was to lift the hospital's ranking to "Class Two A". In China's corporatised hospital system, the hierarchy is similar to classes of hotel, with facilities having a higher class able to levy higher fees and charges on patients.

One of the most significant social gains made from the 1949 Chinese Revolution was the provision of universal health care. Although poorly equipped and bureaucratically mismanaged, the public health system provided cheap and affordable medicines and treatment for the first time to the world's largest population. The free market polices over the past two decades has brought about its collapse.

Since the breakup of the communal system in the rural areas, for example, China's cooperative medical scheme now covers only 7 percent of villages compared with 94 percent in the early 1980s. According to Luo Xiaopeng, a professor of Guizhou University, the operators of many clinics in rural areas—who are often the local Communist Party officials—inflate the prices of medicines in order to maximise their profits.

In the urban areas, millions of workers long ago lost the free healthcare that was provided by their workplace due to the privatisation and shutdown of state-owned enterprises. Tens of millions of rural workers who have migrated to the cities and free trade zones over the past 20 years have no coverage at all.

According an article in the *Australian* newspaper in September, just 16 percent of total health spending in China today is provided by the state, and only one third of that funding goes to rural areas where the majority of the country's poor live. Patient fees have to cover not only the cost of medicines and treatment but also as much as 90 percent of staff wages and operational costs.

Less than 20 percent of Chinese have any health insurance and only 50 percent of urban residents can afford it. As many as 39 percent of the rural population and 36 percent of city dwellers do not admit themselves to hospitals, even when directed by a doctor, because they cannot afford the costs. Luo Xiaopeng told the *Australian*: "In terms of protecting the urban rich, the [health] system is working much better than before. But in terms of protecting the poor, I don't really see it."

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