

Capitalism's deadly toll: 44 children dead in Mexican day care fire

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A fire that swept through the ABC day care center in Hermosillo, the capital of Sonora state in northern Mexico June 5, has claimed the lives of 44 children, while leaving at least 30 others in critical conditions.

As frantic parents and firefighters tried to enter the facility to fight the fire and rescue the children, the building rapidly filled with smoke and carbon monoxide, poisoning toddlers and infants—many of them trapped in their cribs.

This tragedy was not merely an accident; it was a direct result of a capitalist system that puts profits ahead of even the most basic human needs.

Thirty children remain hospitalized, 11 of whom are in very serious condition. Some of the latter are being treated for severe burns that have dehydrated their bodies and damaged their kidneys. Others have suffered severe pulmonary damage and, in some cases, damage to their brain function.

Ten of the injured victims have third-degree burns and are being treated in a Guadalajara. At least one victim, a girl with burns over 80 percent of her body, was flown to a burn unit in Sacramento, California.

The fire started at one of two privately-owned warehouses adjoining the center. One stores vehicle tires. The second is used for vehicle storage and leases office space to the Sonora state government. Smoke detectors may have failed, giving the fire a chance to escalate out of control. Eyewitnesses report hearing an explosion that contributed to spreading the conflagration. The flames spread through the roof of the day care center. It took firefighters two hours to bring the fire under control. According to a report in the Mexico City daily, *La Jornada*, one of the two warehouses had caught fire at least once before.

The IMSS (the Mexican Institute for Social Security) provides childcare at a low cost to 223,000 children

across Mexico as part of a program called Welfare and Child Development Nurseries (*Estancias de Bienestar y Desarrollo Infantil*). The program runs 1,500 centers. ABC is one of 526 private, for profit, day care centers under contract with the IMSS.

The fire raises questions about nursery standards in Mexico and about the way inspections are carried out. The building, a converted warehouse, which appears to have passed inspection on May 26 of this year, has only one exit door and five small windows high up on the walls near the roofline. A second door to the building was never used. Six employees were in charge, caring for 173 children, whose ages ranged from six months to five years.

When the building caught on fire, there were 141 children present; it was nap time. The ABC employees became aware of the fire when synthetic partitions and flammable plastics at the facility began to melt and collapse. By then it was too late, as the building filled with smoke generated by burning partitions, flammable foam mattresses, melting plastic furniture and the sudden and almost total collapse of the building's roof. Health experts attributed the severity of pulmonary damage to the young victims to the noxious fumes generated by the synthetic material.

Preliminary findings indicate that the facility was in clear violation of Mexican regulations, including rules issued last year by the attorney general's office on the use of toxic materials in educational establishments.

Parents were left stunned by the tragedy. Guadalupe Arvizu, whose daughter worked at ABC and whose two-year-old grandson is hospitalized, described the ABC facility: "It was in very bad conditions," she said. "It was a warehouse, with no windows in the classrooms." Arvizu also indicated that the second, emergency door to the center was stuck closed. On Saturday and Sunday, as the first groups of victims were being interred, shocked and

angry parents denounced the IMSS and referred to the ABC facility as a death trap.

Illustrating the popular mood in Hermosillo, *La Jornada* quoted a neighbor and eyewitness, Francisco Soto: “How could this happen?” asked Soto, describing how a young man rammed a pick-up truck through the ABC wall in order to speed up the evacuation of those inside. Soto indicated that many people in the neighborhood were well aware that the facility was owned by well-connected political figures.

The buildings real conditions were in stark contrast to the inspector’s report from the May visit, which indicated that ABC had more than one emergency exit and fire extinguishers. In fact, ABC had none of the elementary preventive systems normally associated with day care centers: sprinklers, partitions made of fire resistant materials, escape routes and an escape plan. In addition, ABC’s child-to-caregiver ratio of 29 to one is almost six times internationally recognized standards for children under 18 months of age and twice the standard for children older than 5.

To the owners of ABC, the facility was in fact a warehouse for children, a way of generating profits at the expense of the welfare of children of single and poor mothers. In Hermosillo, local radio stations and Internet blogs spent the weekend exposing the owners’ political connections with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the National Action Party (PAN), two of the three main ruling political parties in Mexico.

Initially, the authorities refused to give out the names of the ABC owners. The names were released on Saturday afternoon, and it was revealed that two of the owners are employed by the State of Sonora. One of them, Marcia Matilde Altagracia Gómez del Campo Tonella, is an aunt of the wife of Mexican President Felipe Calderón. A third owner is an official of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the ruling party in the state. The revelation raised charges of “influence peddling.” Under those circumstances, it is most probable that no real inspection ever took place.



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