

India: Chhattisgarh government to call probe into industrial accident

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The pro-big business government of the west Indian state of Chhattisgarh has been forced to call a judicial probe into a horrific industrial accident that killed 45 workers at a Bharat Aluminum Co. (BALCO) construction site in Korba last month. Workers and opposition parties have accused Chhattisgarh's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) state government with attempting to cover up for the negligence of BALCO management and its subcontractors.

The workers were killed when a partially built 100-meter smokestack toppled over September 23 in the midst of a heavy thunderstorm. Despite the foul weather, workers had been ordered to continue working on the chimney that was ultimately supposed to reach 275 meters in height. The dead include those working on the chimney at the time it crumbled, several workers who had congregated at the base of the chimney in an attempt to shelter themselves from the rains, and others who were patronizing a nearby canteen and shops.

While many of the workers died instantaneously, relief workers report that others appear to have undergone excruciating deaths after being trapped in debris. Management did not know how many laborers were on the site at the time of the accident, so even a week after the accident it was impossible to be certain of the death toll.

Substandard construction materials, speed-up and other dangerous work practices are believed to have been responsible for the accident. Such profit-maximizing practices are widespread in India, where workplace regulations are lax and not properly policed.

As part of an ambitious plan to expand its aluminum production capacity from the current 350,000 tons a year to a million tons, BALCO is building two 600 megawatt coal-fired power plants in Korba, which lies

about 250 km north of the state capital, Raipur.

BALCO has recently been privatized. But the Indian government retains a 49 percent ownership share and therefore bears direct responsibility for last month's tragedy.

Yet the Indian government has announced no compensation for the families of the victims, most of whom were migrant workers. The Chhattisgarh state government has said it will pay the next of kin of the dead a meager 100,000 rupees (about \$2,000), while BALCO has announced a one-time payment of 500,000 rupees. In India there is no social safety net to speak of, meaning that the families of the victims face destitution.

The power plant was being constructed under contract by the Chinese-based Shandong Electric Power Construction Corporation (SEPCO). Construction of the chimney had been subcontracted by SEPCO to a New-Delhi based firm, Gannon Dunkerley and Company Ltd (GDCL).

On October 7 police arrested the GDCL project manager. The district superintendent of police in Korba told the Indo-Asian News service, "After a detailed interrogation of GDCL project manager Manoj Sharma for the past few days, we finally arrested him today for the Balco mishap." But the police have provided no details as to the charges against the GDCL manager.

There is much to suggest that the arrest was a public relations exercise aimed at deflecting public anger away from the BJP state government. During its rule from 1998 to 2004 at the head of India's National Democratic Alliance government and in the various states it currently rules and has previously ruled, the BJP has established a notorious record of brazen pro-business policies and indifference and even hostility to workers' safety and well being.

Following the September 23 accident some 70 Chinese employees of SEPCO, most of them engineers, fled the state ostensibly out of fear for their lives. Indian airport authorities were subsequently instructed to be on the lookout so as to prevent them from leaving the country. Meanwhile officials of SEPCO have pointed the finger at GDCL, saying it is solely responsible for the mishap.

Yet the Confederation of Indian Trade Unions, which represents some of the workers at the BALCO site, claims that it had long protested to management over the use of inferior construction materials and the haste with which the chimney was being built.

Most workers in India are poor migrants from the countryside or from other states and are in the so-called unorganized (or small employer) sector in which they are virtually no labor standards.

Over the decades, all of the established political parties commencing with the Congress Party and the Hindu-supremacist BJP have cultivated an atmosphere conducive to brutal exploitation of these indigent laborers. For India's ruling elite the pursuit of profit has always trumped any concern for worker well-being. Much of the occupational health legislation does not apply to the small enterprises that employ the overwhelming majority of Indian workers. Even in large enterprises there is barely any enforcement of the legislations' provisions. Frequently employers literally get away with murder.

Serious accidents resulting in death and injury of workers are routinely disposed of by the government and employers providing measly monetary compensation to the victims' families.

Such lackadaisical attitudes toward worker safety were what allowed Union Carbide managers at its chemical plant in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh to ignore elementary safety procedures. The release in 1984 of over 42 tons of toxic methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas as a result of inoperative backup safety systems at the plant caused the immediate death of over 5000 people. Up to 25,000 more later succumbed to various health problems associated with the Bhopal disaster. Even today tens of thousands of people continue to suffer from the long-term health effects of inhaling toxic gas.

Only a few victims have received any compensation and that too in a miserly amount. None of the executives of Union Carbide or Dow Chemicals that

subsequently took over Union Carbide has been held criminally responsible for this social disaster.

As recently as this July a bridge under construction for the subway system in New Delhi collapsed and killed five workers immediately and injured a further fifteen. Three cranes sent to lift the broken sections and other debris collapsed injuring at least six more people. Due to the publicity this accident received, the bosses admitted that over 90 workers have been killed during construction of the New Delhi-Metro system in the past 10 years.

Similarly in a haste to complete the construction of various facilities for the Commonwealth Games that Delhi is hosting next year, an estimated 48 workers have died from accidents and over 100 been seriously injured.

The United Nations' International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that close to 50,000 Indian workers die each year from either work-related accidents or work-related illness. Despite this damning statistic the ruling elite has undertaken no urgent remedial measures. The scribes in the corporate media, meanwhile, routinely devote no more than a paragraph to the many workplace accidents that occur every day.



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