

Six workers die in Subic shipyard in the Philippines

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Five workers were killed and eight injured last Friday, when the stern ramp of a ship in drydock at the Subic Keppel Shipyard broke free of its foundation posts and collapsed, crushing them. One of the injured workers subsequently died at the hospital, bringing the death toll to six.

The workers who died were Jaylord Reyes, Ronald Lara, Mark San Juan, Glen Miranda, Chrisander Papna and Ronaldo Bagay.

Keppel is a major marine and offshore equipment company operating out of Singapore. Keppel runs two shipyards in Philippines, one in Batangas and one in Subic.

Details of the event are sketchy. Keppel has actively suppressed the release of information regarding the accident, denying government officials, investigators and journalists access to the shipyard.

The workers were welding the 42-ton stern ramp of the container ship MV Tombarra on Friday morning when it collapsed. The force of the collapse was so great that the workers who rushed to the scene said they collected the body parts of the dead and placed them in separate bags. They hoped that the medical examiner would be able to piece them together during the autopsy.

This statement is the only report from the workers available. Keppel issued strict instructions to workers, forbidding them to speak with the media.

Interviews with the family members of the dead, however, reveal that they were not informed of the deaths of their loved ones by the company. One relative interviewed by the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* said: "At first, there were a lot of conflicting reports. No company official contacted us. We just heard it from other workers. They said that there was an explosion. Others said it was a ramp that fell down on them."

The wife of Chrisander Papna, one of the dead workers, stated: "We were confused about what happened inside. But no one told us, until finally, a relative of ours who worked in the municipal hall told us about the accident and we rushed to the funeral parlor."

While Keppel did not see fit to inform the workers' families that their husbands and fathers had been crushed to death, it did issue a statement to the press expressing that management "regrets that the accident had happened ... We would like to offer our deepest condolences to the families of the victims, and we are rendering the necessary assistance to them."

On Sunday, Keppel president Mok Kim Whang informed the press that the dead workers were employed by a subcontractor, Garcia & Rocafor General Services. The subcontracting of labor is universally employed by corporations in an attempt to slough off responsibility for the exploitation, abuse and death of workers. Nevertheless, the blood of workers stains the shipyard of Keppel; accountability for this cannot be subcontracted.

Whang stated that a task force composed entirely of senior management officials from Keppel would be dispatched from Singapore to investigate the tragedy. No external agents or government officials would participate in this investigation. Keppel is so confident that the Philippine government will do nothing in response to this event, that it is not even making a half-hearted attempt to disguise the fact that this 'investigation' is a whitewash.

Work continues in the shipyard, even though no

investigation has been conducted to determine the cause of the tragedy. The lives and wellbeing of workers do not enter into managerial calculus. If more workers die, Keppel will no doubt again express 'regret.'

Keppel is not merely stonewalling when it denies the police, civil authorities and journalists access to the site where the six workers died. It is acting within its legal rights, rights which have been granted it by the Philippine government.

The Keppel Shipyard is part of the Subic Freeport. The former US naval base has been converted into a tourist and business haven. Foreigners are invited to swim with the dolphins, jet ski around the bay and manage their companies, which have been granted legal immunities and exemption from government oversight within the Special Economic Zone of Subic.

The Special Economic Zone Act of 1995 created the Philippine Economic Zone Authority and a series of such zones throughout the country. Foreign corporations conduct tax-exempt operations in the zones, which are also shielded from external government supervision. The Economic Zone Authority has been given autonomy in monitoring working conditions, wages and safety. The corporations within the zones regulate themselves, that is to say they are not regulated at all.

Abuse, exploitation and injury are commonplace. The minimum wage is rarely paid. Slightly less than 100,000 workers are employed within the Subic Freeport. Their labor is the source of tremendous profits for those companies operating in the Special Economic Zone. The Philippine state actively assists in their exploitation, and if some workers die while profit is being scraped from their backs, the government has already publicly promised that it will turn a blind eye.

In 2003, an oil tanker exploded inside the Keppel shipyard, killing five workers. The Hanjin shipyard, which also operates in Subic, has had 29 workers die in industrial accidents. The monthly injury report at Hanjin consistently has numbers over 30. The workers are paid less than the minimum wage, fed what they call 'maggot-laden food' and are frequently abused by their superiors. Hanjin, like Keppel, operates in the

Special Economic Zone with complete impunity.

The front page of the web site for the Subic Bay economic zone lists its selling points: "Productive, low-cost and English-proficient workers. US\$6.63 minimum daily wage. More than 700,000 working population in Subic Bay Freeport and its environs. Highly trainable workforce." The economic zone markets itself to the world as home to easily exploitable labor.

The families who have been deprived of their loved ones and providers will be compensated by Keppel for the funeral expenses, nothing more. Six "productive, low-cost, highly trainable" human beings are dead. The exploitation of the living continues.



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