

# Locked-in workers die in fire in the Philippines

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Seventeen workers died in a fire that destroyed Novo Jeans and Shirts, the retail store where they both worked and lived in Butuan City, Mindanao in the Philippines. The workers were trapped, locked in the building by management, when the fire began in the early morning of May 9.

Butuan City sits at the mouth of the Agusan River in Northeastern Mindanao, the large southern island of the Philippines. It has a population of well over 300,000 and is classified as highly urbanized. It is representative of the combined and uneven development that characterizes provincial cities in countries of belated capitalist development throughout the world. The frenetic world of global trade—malls, multi-story retail complexes—sits cheek by jowl with the mud and narrow stalls of the wet market.

Like all provincial Philippine cities, Butuan City is a dumping ground for the offscourings of global commerce. Flatware coated with lead paint, cheap plastic knock-offs of branded goods, and the rejected discards of Western assembly lines all end up as commodities in places like Butuan City. One such retail franchise throughout the Philippines is Novo Jeans and Shirts.

Novo Jeans and Shirts occupied the three-story Lamberto Tan building, an aging retail outlet, formerly a movie theatre. On the first two floors the clothing and cheap merchandise were sold. On the third, the workers, all women, slept at night.

This is a routine practice. Management of small-scale industry and retail outlets deliberately hire young women from distant provinces, knowing that their

distance from home will make them easy prey to rapacious exploitation. During the hiring process the fact that the business “allows” workers to stay on-site is depicted as a perk: you won’t have to pay rent and you can send all of your money home, the women are told.

Upon their arrival at their place of employment, they find that this practice of being employed as stay-in labor reduces them to near slave conditions. The women at Novo Jeans and Shirts worked 12 to 14 hours a day, seven days a week. They received no overtime pay. They were paid 160 pesos a day (less than \$US4). The non-agricultural minimum wage in Mindanao is P286 per day, although management may have justified the sub-minimum wages by claiming that they were providing the workers with shelter. At the end of six months the workers are fired and then hired again, to maintain their condition as contractual labor.

The women who sleep in the building are locked in at night. A large steel door rolls down over the entrance and is padlocked shut from the outside. This is a standard management practice to prevent the theft of goods.

At shortly after 3 a.m. on May 9, a fire broke out in the Novo Jeans building. Three women were able to stagger down to the ground floor despite the thick smoke and attempted to get out. The steel door would not yield. They pounded on the door, burning their arms on the hot metal. Passers-by became aware of the fire and the pounding on the door from the inside and tried to open the door with a hydraulic jack. But to no avail. The women returned to the second floor, pried open a window and jumped. They were the only

survivors.

Seventeen bodies have been recovered, charred beyond recognition. If the statement from management that 21 workers occupied the building is correct, one body is still missing. The escaped women, however, claimed that there were 28 workers living there.

The fire department eventually arrived. The “highly urbanized” Butuan City with its 300,000 residents has four fire trucks. Only three work. Over the space of three hours, fire trucks from the surrounding provincial towns arrived. Of the 10 cities and towns in the province of Agusan del Norte, only four have fire trucks. The Novo Jeans and Shirts building burned to the ground. The second and third floors collapsed.

The practices of the owners of the Novo Jeans and Shirts company received the full support of the local government. On March 22, the building passed fire inspection, without the inspectors or the owners ever declaring that anyone was resident there.

The average age of the 17 dead workers was 22 years old. The oldest worker was 30, two were 19. One of the dead workers, Bella Rose Dumagpit, was six months pregnant.

The city government of Butuan, which had turned a blind eye to the exploitation and violation of the rights of the workers at Novo Jeans and Shirts, has declared May 10 a day of mourning. They have offered 5,000 pesos (slightly over \$US100) to the families of each of the deceased. Management has issued no apology, nor have they offered anything to the families of the victims.

The inferno of May 9 is an all too common event.

In October 2004, eight locked-in workers in were killed in a fire. In March 2007, seven workers died at a fire in a noodle factory in Cebu City. In May 2007, four locked-in workers at a garments factory died. In December 2007, two workers at a rice cake factory in Tondo, were killed in a fire. In June 2009, three locked-in employees at RM Promo and Display in Santa Quiteria, Caloocan City. And only three days before the

fire in Butuan City, a stay-in delivery boy in Santa Cruz, Manila, also died in a fire. These are but a selection.

The practice of locking workers in is routine and any fire will almost certainly result in the loss of life. Both the capitalists who own the businesses and the local and national governments who defend their interests regard workers as expendable, grist for grinding out profit.



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