

India: Profiteering, negligence, and corruption lead to 50 deaths in factory explosion

Sathish Simon
12 September 2012

More than fifty workers and passersby have died and another seventy were injured, many critically, as the result of a massive explosion and fire Sept. 5 at a firecracker factory located near Sivakasi. (Sivakasi lies 500 kilometers southwest from Chennai, the capital of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.)

This tragic incident has again highlighted how the scramble for profit and government indifference and corruption leads to the flouting of elementary industrial safety regulations, resulting in a terrible toll in human life.

The first explosion at the Om Shakti Fireworks in Mudalipatti village happened around 12:20 PM. Many of the dead were passersby who rushed to the aid of those hurt or trapped by the initial explosion. As the fire caused by the first explosion spread, it set off further stores of firecrackers and gunpowder, sending bricks, concrete and other debris flying.

Initial reports said 300 workers were at work in the factory when the first explosion occurred, but now it is claimed that the real total was around 30.

The noise of the explosions was heard even two kilometers away and the fire engulfed virtually the entire factory, razing 40 of the factory's 45 rooms.

Investigators have yet to conclusively determine the cause of the initial explosion.

The Om Sakthi Fireworks Industries factory was working round the clock with a view to maximizing production and profits in the run-up to the fast-approaching Diwali festival season.

The police superintendent for Virudhunagar district where Sivakasi is located, Najmul Hoda, said the factory had been "operating illegally," because its license had been suspended by the state's explosives department for flouting safety regulations. He noted that there had been complaints about the company "stocking excess

explosives and being overstaffed."

However, after suspending the company's license, the government did nothing to enforce its order to cease production. In Tamil Nadu, as across India, governments routinely fail to enforce the already lax occupational health and safety standards due to short-staffing, indifference, and graft.

Workers at the Om Sakthi Fireworks plant report that they were given no safety training to speak of. "We were not told anything about the materials used, only briefed on how to make the crackers," Bijay, a worker at the plant told local media. "When we came for this work, we did not realize that this could be dangerous."

Like many of the workers at the factory, Bijay is a migrant from north India. One of India's fastest growing states, Tamil Nadu has more than a million migrant workers employed in the so-called "informal," i.e. essentially unregulated, sector where poverty-wages and long-hours are the norm and workers have little if any protection against arbitrary dismissal.

The police and local government officials are trying to scapegoat workers at the factory for the explosion. Police have arrested more than a dozen people, including ordinary workers, the factory foreman and two other supervisors, on charges of "culpable homicide" and "storing explosives illegally." In an attempt to justify the arrests, Hoda said, "The explosion may have been sparked by untrained workers mixing wrong chemicals for the fireworks."

The factory's owner, Murugesan, fled the town after the explosion, but was arrested four days later. He is a local leader of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), the Tamil Nadu-regionalist bourgeois party that heads the state's government. No doubt, Murugesan had counted on his connections to the state's ruling party

to allow him to operate the Om Shakti Fireworks even after its license was suspended and with complete disregard for the safety of his employees and local villagers.

The explosion at the firecracker plant has also exposed the lack of basic infrastructure in the area. Rescue efforts were hampered by the lack of proper roads and health care facilities.

Although Sivakasi is a center of firework production—there are more 850 factories in the area producing more than 20 billion rupees (US \$360 million) worth of fireworks annually—and accidents are all too frequent, it has few facilities to treat people with burns. Those with more serious burns had to be taken to Madurai, some 70 kilometers away, for treatment. Many lives could have been saved had they been given timely treatment, charge the families of the victims.

Due to a lack of modern firefighting equipment, including masks, it took the fire rescue team four hours to put out the blaze.

The firework industry in the Sivakasi region is responsible for about 90 percent of India's total firecracker production and currently employs 125,000 workers directly and about 200,000 indirectly.

Violation of safety regulations in the fireworks industry in Sivakasi and other parts of India has caused frequent accidental explosions. According to the Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation, a government monitoring body, nearly 250 have died in fire accidents in Sivakasi over the last 10 years, including 23 last year. But, not one factory owner has been punished. Nor has the government made any serious effort to ensure that workers are given proper safety training.

The lack of safety measures in the industry is so obvious that even officials of the industry lobby group have admitted it. S. Vijayakumar, president of the Tamil Nadu Fireworks and Amorges Manufacturers' Association, said, "It is a hazardous industry. Rules are being flouted at will." Although the government had formed committees to make safety suggestions, "none of the recommendations have been implemented," he added. "Some factories bring in untrained workers, while others do not have necessary tools like copper plates and protective masks."

As Indian governments routinely do in response to large-scale tragedies, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced a payment of 200,000 rupees (\$3,600) to the next of kin of each of the deceased and 50,000 rupees (\$900) for those injured in the Om Shakti Fireworks

inferno. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa has also announced a 200,000 rupee payment to relatives of those who perished in the fire. She has further announced her government will give 25,000 rupees (\$440) and 10,000 rupees (\$180) respectively to those who suffered serious and "simple" injuries.

The cynicism of the Indian elite towards the lives of workers and other toilers is revealed not only in the meager sums provided their next of kin, but in their criminal neglect of elementary occupational health and safety measures.

The factories in Sivakasi, it should be noted, are also notorious for employing large numbers of young children who work long hours for reduced wages in violation of child labour regulations.

Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM] Polit Bureau member Sitaram Yechury, who visited the fire site, told reporters that his party wants a "high level enquiry" into last week's tragedy conducted by the pro-big business central and state governments and said greater regulation of the industry was needed on "national security" grounds.

Over the past two years, the Stalinists have isolated a series of militant strikes in Tamil Nadu and other parts of India, while subordinating them to their parliamentary maneuvers with the parties of the bourgeoisie. Thus striking workers at BYD Electronics were told to terminate their militant struggle on the grounds that when the AIADMK came to power it would be more favorable to the workers than the CPM's erstwhile electoral ally, the DMK. In addition to being the party of the owner of the Om Shakti Fireworks, the AIADMK has a long rightwing record, including using antiterrorist laws to target its political opponents and breaking a strike of state government workers through mass firings and state repression.



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