

Pakistani government facing public anger over Karachi fire

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In the wake of the factory fire in Karachi last Tuesday that claimed an estimated 295 lives, the Pakistani government is desperately seeking to divert public anger and cover up its own responsibility and that of the Sindh provincial government for the tragedy.

The fire in the four-storey garment factory, Ali Enterprises, located in an industrial suburb, trapped at least 600 workers. The building lacked elementary safety measures and all exits were locked except one. Earlier the same day, at least 23 workers died when a shoe factory in Lahore burned to the ground.

The Karachi blaze was the one of the world's worst industrial fires since 1993, when 188 workers were killed and another 469 injured in the Kader toy factory blaze near the Thai capital of Bangkok. Then too, locked or blocked exits and a lack of basic fire safety measures were responsible for the high death toll.

President Asif Ali Zardari announced an investigation into the Karachi fire and compensation of 300,000 rupees (\$US3,170) for the families of those killed. Likewise, the provincial government in Sindh—a coalition between Zardari's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM)—appointed a commission of inquiry led by a retired judge, to report in a week.

In another bid to placate public outrage, Sindh Industries Minister Abdul Rauf Siddiqi resigned on Friday. The three owners of Ali Enterprises—Abdul Aziz Bhaila and his two sons—were charged with murder, but then bailed last week. The local police chief announced that several government officials had been charged with negligence.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that four fires had occurred at the factory over the past two years, including one just before the deadly blaze. The owners are attempting to shift the blame to the fire brigade, which they claim arrived late and “despite all requests used only one nozzle of the vehicle to fight the fire.”

While the factory's owners and local officials are certainly culpable, successive provincial and national governments are responsible for the dangerous and unhealthy conditions in the country's factories, many of which operate illegally. Pakistan's limited fire safety and other factory codes are routinely flouted.

The deaths have provoked an outpouring of anger among working people. The *Asia Times* reported: “Karachi, the country's commercial capital, with a population of 18 million, shut down in mourning on Thursday in the aftermath of the factory fire there. The city took on an eerie silence, with public transport suspended and factories and markets closed and thin attendance at offices.”

The mother of one of the dead workers told the Associated Press: “The owner of the garment factory should be arrested and hanged ... I do not think I will get justice as these owners are powerful and rich.”

Sympathy strikes and demonstrations took place in other parts of the country and continued on Friday and Saturday. But the gatherings were dominated by the political parties and trade unions that have presided over the appalling factory conditions for decades.

In Karachi, the MQM called for three days of

mourning. Its founder, Altaf Hussain, claimed to be “sorely distressed” by the fire, which he said was a national tragedy. But the MQM is part of the provincial government and Industries Minister Siddiqi belonged to the party.

The Ali Enterprises fire points to the oppressive and unsafe conditions throughout Pakistan’s industries. There are seven industrial cities in the Karachi area, containing around 12,000 factories and 50,000 smaller enterprises.

Karachi’s former top administrative official, Fahim Zaman Khan, told Agence France Presse: “There is not a single factory in Karachi which is different in shape and facilities to the one gutted by the fire. Everyone, including our rulers, could see similar factories nearby the gutted one but avoid taking action.”

Bribery is rife among those responsible for enforcing health and safety regulations. Labour activist Sharafat Ali told the *New York Times*: “The state inspectors can make a lot of extra money. They have lifestyles that go beyond their wages.”

An editorial in the *Dawn* newspaper last week accused the government of complicity in the breaches of safety and working conditions. “Factories in Pakistan are kingdoms unto themselves. They are concentration camps where workers are denied their basic rights enshrined in the constitution, in the country’s labour laws and in international conventions... Since the late 1990s, different administrations in Punjab and Sindh bowed before the industrialist lobby and barred inspectors from entering the factory premises to check if safety and other standards mandated by the law were being met.”

Such criticisms and expressions of concern by the Pakistani media and political establishment will do nothing to alter the conditions facing workers, which are dictated by the demands of global capital for the cheapest sources of labour. Garment companies in Pakistan are in a cutthroat competition with their rivals in countries like Bangladesh, Vietnam and Sri Lanka to secure contracts with the world’s major brand names.

Employers are driven to cut costs by paying low wages, hiring casual workers and ignoring labour and building regulations. Monthly wages in Pakistan are between 5,000 and 10,000 rupees (\$52 to \$104). Governments seeking to woo investors turn a blind eye to the systematic abuse of regulations.

On the day of the Karachi fire, President Zardari signed the Special Economic Zone Bill that will provide investors with lucrative concessions, including a one-time duty exemption for machinery and equipment, and a 10-year tax holiday.

Moreover, the international competition is intensifying amid the ongoing global economic crisis and a sharp downturn in demand in key markets in the US and Europe. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, textile and clothing exports dropped by 10 percent in the 2011-2012 fiscal year compared to the previous year.

Similar conditions face garment workers in other countries. The Bangladesh garment industry is the country’s main foreign exchange earner, accounting for 80 percent of exports. But Bangladeshi workers struggle to survive on poverty-level wages. Factory fires and building collapses are regular occurrences.

The dangerous and oppressive conditions that face workers throughout Asia and result in tragedies such as the Karachi fire are a product of capitalist exploitation. This situation will be ended only through a unified struggle by workers internationally to overthrow the profit system on the basis of a socialist perspective.



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