

Pakistan's factory fire: An indictment of capitalism

Wije Dias
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The tragic blaze in Pakistan that killed nearly 300 workers last week was the world's worst factory fire, surpassing the terrible death toll of 188 in the Kader toy factory fire in Thailand in 1993. The latest fire was a particularly horrific product of the dangerous and oppressive conditions that are the common experience of tens of millions of workers in Asia and many other parts of the world.

Over the past three decades, countries like Pakistan and Thailand have been integrated into globalised production systems like never before. In the garment industry, global corporations contract out production of their prestige products to the sweatshops of Asia, setting in motion a dog-eat-dog competition to cut costs and provide the lowest price.

National governments are the facilitators of this global system of capitalist exploitation. Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayawardene spoke for them all when he publicly declared in the late 1970s: "We must kiss and welcome the international corporate investors." In other words, everything must be done to attract foreign capital, whatever the consequences for the working class.

About 650 workers were working at the time the fire broke out at the Ali Enterprises factory in an industrial district of the Pakistani commercial capital of Karachi. The building was a death trap. There were no fire exits, windows were barred and stairways blocked. There was only one open exit. Fire safety measures were non-existent. Many of those who survived were injured as they jumped to escape the blaze.

The factory was not legally registered and its

insurance covered only the machinery, not the workers. No government inspections were made of the factory for safety or working conditions, although it had been functioning for 12 years. The employees had no appointment letters and were hired through a labour contractor to keep wages low and avoid pension payments and other benefits. The slave-like conditions in the Ali Enterprises factory, which are undoubtedly similar to hundreds, if not thousands, of others, point to the connivance of governments, both national and provincial, in the criminal exploitation of workers.

The official response to the tragedy follows a well-established practice. There has been an utterly hypocritical outpouring of sympathy by those who are politically responsible for the conditions that produced the fire—starting with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and central government ministers, and extending down to various politicians in Sindh province.

The government has announced a pitiful amount of compensation for the victims' families—hush money designed to prevent the fire becoming a focus for broader discontent in the working class.

The national and provincial governments have both announced inquiries whose purpose will be to identify a handful of scapegoats and cover up the deeper social causes of the fire. The factory owners and a few government officials have already been charged. In any case, Pakistan's 1934 Factory Act has never been revised. The maximum penalty for industrial negligence is only 500 rupees (\$5).

The Pakistani press and trade unions have engaged in

a great deal of handwringing over the appalling conditions facing workers, the lack of government regulation and the glaring deficiencies of the inspection and enforcement system. But once public outrage has died down, so will the bluster of the media and the unions, as they continue their collaboration in the exploitation of workers.

To date, the global corporations that had their garments made by Ali Enterprises have remained silent. Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), a German activist organisation, complained that KIK, the seventh largest apparel retailer in Germany, had not commented on the fire at its supplier's factory. "That KIK has failed to respond with any remorse or urgency highlights the total lack of respect and care they have for the workers employed in their supply chain," CCC stated.

However, any expressions of remorse or empty promises to improve conditions by companies such as KIK are commercial decisions designed to protect their brand names and public image. These corporations stand at the apex of the system of capitalist exploitation. Their drive for cheaper products to undercut their rivals ensures that the appalling conditions facing workers in countries like Pakistan continue.

The circumstances surrounding the Karachi fire and the subsequent cover-up parallel almost exactly what took place at the Kader factory in Thailand nearly two decades ago. If anything, the conditions facing the working class throughout the region have worsened since then as the global economic breakdown, and the resulting decline in markets in Europe and the US, intensifies competition for orders and foreign investment.

Workers' conditions in Pakistan are not fundamentally different from those of their class brothers and sisters throughout Asia. Inside the myriad economic zones in the region, investors enjoy a host of special privileges, including tax breaks and exemptions from limited labour laws. Workers are banned from organising or taking industrial action.

The situation facing Free Trade Zone (FTZ) workers

in Sri Lanka is just as oppressive as that in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam or other countries. The government assists companies to herd mainly rural female workers into garment sweatshops where they work long hours and live in cramped, primitive accommodation. When anger exploded among workers in Sri Lanka's Katunayake FTZ last year over changes to their provident fund rights, the government sent in the security forces, which shot one worker dead and injured others. No one has been convicted over the killing.

Tragedies like the Karachi factory fire cannot be ended by outpourings of moral concern or appeals to the powers-that-be. Such disasters are anti-social crimes against the working class that stem from the profit system itself. Globally-organised production has the potential to provide a decent standard of living for every human being on the face of the planet, but under capitalism it has only produced fabulous wealth for a tiny corporate elite, accompanied by the deepening immiseration of working people.

The only solution lies in the unification of the working class throughout Asia and around the world to abolish the global system of capitalist exploitation and reorganise society from top to bottom on the basis of a world planned socialist economy. That is the revolutionary socialist perspective for which only the international Trotskyist movement—the International Committee of the Fourth International—and its sections fight.

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