

# Chinese poultry slaughterhouse fire kills more than 100 workers

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A fire swept through a poultry processing plant in northern China yesterday, killing at least 119 workers, many of whom were trapped behind locked doors. More than 300 workers were inside the Baoyuan plant at Dehui in Jilin province, about 800 kilometres northeast of Beijing, when the fire broke out. Emergency workers searching for survivors were uncertain how many remained trapped inside, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

While the tragedy highlights the unsafe conditions throughout the country's sweatshop factories, policed by the Chinese Communist Party regime, it also follows a series of industrial catastrophes in Bangladesh and Pakistan and a factory explosion in the United States, pointing to the increasingly common dangers facing workers worldwide as a result of the relentless drive for corporate profit.

Survivors interviewed by the media described panic as workers, mostly women, struggled through smoke to reach doors that turned out to be blocked. One worker, 39-year-old Guo Yan, told Xinhua the emergency exit at her workstation could not be opened. As a result, she was knocked to the ground in the crush of workers searching for a way to escape. "I could only crawl desperately forward," Guo said. "I worked alongside an old lady and a young girl, but I don't know if they survived or not."

It seems that escape route indicators blacked out, leaving many workers with little chance of finding routes to flee the fire. "Inside and outside the workshop was glowing red, and the lighting and escape indicators were all out," another worker, Wang Xiaoyun, told the China News Service.

The *Southern Metropolis Daily* reported on its microblog that only a side door to the building was open, with the rest of the exits locked. The newspaper

quoted an unidentified worker as saying the fire engulfed the building in just three minutes.

Reports on Hong Kong's Phoenix Television cited family members as saying the doors were always kept locked during working hours and workers forbidden to leave. The plant reportedly never carried out fire drills.

The provincial government said 54 people were being treated in hospitals, mostly for inhalation of toxic gases, including ammonia. A media spokesperson said he expected the death toll to rise as more bodies were recovered from the charred buildings.

Xinhua reported the blaze appeared to have been sparked by three explosions, which the provincial fire department attributed to an ammonia leak. A long-standing liquefied ammonia operator, Lu Qiang, told *China Business News* that deaths occur every year from ammonia leaks in refrigeration facilities. Because ammonia is the cheapest cooling media, many refrigeration businesses prefer it, despite the safety dangers.

It is the third major industrial blaze reported in China in the past four days: an oil-tank explosion in Liaoning province on Sunday killed two people and left two others missing, and a fire on Friday raged through a grain storage centre in Heilongjiang province, although nobody was hurt.

The fire is one of China's worst recent industrial disasters, with the death toll the highest since a September 2008 mining cave-in that claimed 281 lives. It is also the country's worst fire for more than a decade, according to listings on Baidu, an Internet portal. In December 2000, a blaze inside a four-storey shopping centre at Luoyang, in the central province of Henan, killed 309 people. In 1993, a toy factory in southern China killed 87 workers.

Chinese social media soon featured accusations of lax

safety standards, a token government response and possible corruption—such as bribes paid to safety inspectors to allow exits to remain locked.

The Chinese leadership tried to assuage the public outcry by promising that no effort would be spared to rescue the survivors, investigate the fire and punish anyone responsible. President Xi Jinping, who is touring the Americas, told officials to “get to the bottom of the causes of this accident, pursue culpability according to the law, sum up the profound lessons and adopt effective measures to resolutely prevent major accidents from occurring,” Xinhua reported.

Most likely, as has become standard practice, individual company and local government scapegoats will be found. A Xinhua editorial yesterday said: “Companies that violate the law and officials who neglect their duties deserve harsh punishment.”

The promises of action to prevent future catastrophes will soon be forgotten, just as they were after the Henan fire in 2000, the 2008 mining disaster and, more recently, the 2011 crash of high-speed passenger trains, which killed more than 40 people.

The government claims to have tightened safety checks on factories and mines, and that workplace accident deaths fell nearly 5 percent last year. These assertions not only lack credibility but underscore Beijing’s contempt for the lives of workers—over 70,000 still died in industrial accidents in each of the past two years, according to official figures.

Unlike many of China’s notorious coal mines, where tens of thousands of miners have perished in explosions and collapses over the past three decades of rampant capitalist development, the Jilin Baoyuanfeng chicken plant was a new facility. It was built in 2009 to exploit the growing market for poultry products in China and globally. Nearby is one of the biggest producers of chickens in China, Jilin Deda Co., which is partly owned by Thailand-based giant Charoen Pokphand Group.

By 2011, Dehui’s poultry industry had the capacity to produce 250 million chickens a year and slaughter 150 million of them. The conditions in the factories are driven by the fight between rival conglomerates to gain larger shares of the highly profitable global food market.

The Beijing regime’s transformation of China into a cheap labour platform for global capitalism is

responsible for industrial disasters such as yesterday’s. But China is not alone. In Pakistan last September, at least 259 workers in the Ali Enterprises garment factory in Karachi died in the world’s deadliest factory fire. It highlighted the slave-like exploitation of workers in the clothing plants that service the needs of major Western brands.

In Bangladesh, just six weeks ago, the Rana Plaza in Dhaka collapsed, killing at least 1,127 people, mostly garment workers who were ordered back into the building after cracks appeared in its walls. Only six months earlier, a fire at the Tazreen garment factory burned 112 workers to death.

Dangerous conditions are not confined to the most oppressed countries. In the US, an explosion at a fertiliser plant in West, Texas killed 15 people, injured more than 200 others, and destroyed 37 city blocks in April. According to a safety plan filed with the federal government, the factory had no automatic shutoff system or firewalls.



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