

Relatives protest over Chinese poultry factory fire deaths

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Relatives of the workers who were killed in last week's fire at a chicken slaughterhouse in China's northeastern Jilin province have held a series of protests, and have accused officials of covering up the real death toll. The authorities put the number of deaths at 120, but surviving workers and victims' families claim that the actual number could be 240.

More than 300 workers were inside the Baoyuan plant at Dehui, about 800 kilometres from Beijing, when a fire swept through the poultry processing plant on June 3. It was one of China's worst industrial disasters. Many of the victims were trapped behind locked doors.

The first protest occurred the day after the tragedy. As a handful of relatives knelt in the middle of a road in Dehui city, about 100 people gathered around them to listen to their grievances. Zhao Zhenchun, who lost both his wife and sister in the fire, said: "I don't think safety was being managed properly. This should never happen again. They paid the price with their blood. So many of these big disasters in China are caused by lax supervision."

Instead of answering their demands, the authorities dispatched police to disperse the protesters. Nevertheless, about 100 members of grieving families demonstrated outside the Jilin Baoyuanfeng Poultry Co. plant the next day. Again, they were subjected to police repression. Reuters reported: "Young men and police stumbled into a ditch during scuffles, and police officers were seen kicking and stamping on one man. The protest was dispersed after around 20 minutes, with at least one man taken away by police."

As the police tried to remove him, a man who had lost his daughter in the fire shouted that the officials were "lying" about how many were killed. "If you go and count the numbers, check the name lists, it's totally

false," he said. "You can shoot me, I will still say it." (See photo of armed police blocking off the burned plant)

A *Beijing Youth Daily* journalist wrote in his microblog that victims' families were denied any details of the fate of their lost loved ones, and immediate relatives were forcibly gathered in a motel, effectively locking them up.

In response to rising public anger over the rampant policy of allowing businesses to put profit before workers' safety—this discussion again dominated Chinese social media following the disaster—authorities are implementing notorious "Weiwen" ("maintain stability") measures to silence protests.

The local authorities last week held an emergency meeting, which decided to "spare no efforts to maintain social stability and resolutely prevent any major mass incident." The term "mass incident" is the official language that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) bureaucracy uses to describe mass demonstrations, protests and strikes.

In line with that policy, the government set up a "work team" for each victim's family. The purpose is not to assist them, but to prevent them making any further protests.

The Chinese authorities initially established that explosions of leaked ammonia gas caused the blaze, which was exacerbated by flammable building materials, poorly designed escape exits and inadequate fire prevention equipment.

Blocked exits clearly contributed to the high death toll, with many bodies found around the closed doors. A 36-year-old worker surnamed Li told Reuters that fire doors were locked because the management was "worried workers would go outside, not work, and waste time." He added: "Some people also get hungry

and will go for food. They were worried about that too.”

Li said there was a fire three years ago at the facility, where ammonia is stored for refrigeration, but nothing was done to improve safety.

Locked fire doors are a widespread occurrence, forming part of an “enclosed management” policy throughout China’s industry that involves the close surveillance and regimentation of workforces. The Chinese authorities are deeply concerned by online discussions on “enclosed management” because it is integral to the sweatshop system that depends on the exploitation of millions of workers as cheap, disciplined labour—from giant corporations, such as Foxconn, to smaller enterprises like Jilin Baoyuanfeng Poultry.

The fire took place on the eve of June 4, the highly sensitive anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, in which the regime deployed tanks and troops to put down a nationwide upheaval of urban workers and students. Beijing also fears a development like that in Turkey, where a relatively minor incident (the bulldozing of Istanbul’s Gezi Park to make way for a shopping mall) has triggered wider mass protests and demonstrations against the national government.

With slowing economic growth and rising unemployment, China is just as prone to a social explosion. The CCP’s mouthpiece, the *People’s Daily*, last Wednesday urged officials to be careful in dealing with mounting social tensions. It warned: “With rising consciousness of defending rights today, conflicts and disputes are easy to mix up, making the burning point low. Mishandling [of them] is very likely to impact on stability.”

In another sign of high-level nervousness, the State Council (the cabinet) set up a special team headed by Yang Dongliang, the director of the State Safety Supervision Bureau, to investigate the fire. He held a meeting in the Jilin provincial capital of Changchun on Thursday, where he stated that not only the company owners, but the government must bear “inescapable responsibility” for the disaster. He warned that local officials could not just “keep their eyes on tax revenues” from business and economic growth, without taking into account workers’ safety. “This is the bottom line,” he insisted, because it affected “social harmony.”

Yang was promoted by the state media for his professed concern for migrant workers—who accounted for the majority of the fire victims. “The owners of enterprises only treat migrant workers as cheap labour ... to blindly pursue production and profit,” he said, declaring “this absolutely cannot be allowed.”

In order to divert public anger by producing immediate scapegoats, the authorities have arrested the president and general manager of Jilin Baoyuanfeng Poultry Co. and frozen their corporate accounts. However, as with the coalmine disasters that kill thousands of Chinese workers every year, prosecuting individual owners and low-ranking officials will do nothing to address the fundamental cause of the problem—the private profit system that the CCP bureaucracy has re-established over the past 30 years.



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