

Dormitory fire kills seven migrant textile workers in Italy

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Seven immigrant workers died and another three were injured in a devastating fire on Sunday in Prato, a town just north of Florence, the capital of the region of Tuscany. All of the victims were of Chinese origin. They were trapped in their sleep as fire raged through the network of cardboard compartments where they slept in an improvised dormitory located on the factory premises.

The workers were employed under the appalling safety and working conditions prevailing in the sweatshops of the town's Macrolotto industrial district. Garment factories employing mostly immigrant labour in the district provide products for many of Italy's top brands.

An off-duty police official who saw the fire and sounded the alarm described the scene: "The worst thing was hearing the cries of the people trapped inside. I did what I could, I dragged two people out... I think the flames caught them in their sleep."

A fire official quoted by *Corriere della Sera* declared that there were clear violations of safety rules in the factory and evidence of unauthorised construction to erect the dormitories.

The precise cause of the blaze has not yet been determined, but the fire led to the collapse of a portion of the roof over the sleeping quarters for more than a dozen workers. The atrocious working and living conditions prevailing in the industrial area of Prato were well known to the authorities. Local officials expressed their opinion that it was only a matter of time before such an accident took place.

Prato has undergone a transformation in recent years. The town was renowned for its textile industry, but as competition intensified with the globalization of the industry, big-name clothing labels increasingly turned to Chinese-staffed workshops in the region to maximize

their profits.

Formerly, major Western companies outsourced their work to cheap-labour platforms in Asia and China. Now, the globalization of the labour market increasingly makes it possible for the same companies to set up enclaves of immigrant workers in their countries of origin and duplicate the horrendous working conditions abroad.

Commenting on this development, the web site SweatFree Communities wrote: "Italy's finest fashion houses are leaning increasingly on an army of cheap Chinese immigrants who have turned Tuscany's textile powerhouse into Italy's Little China."

The web site cites one Italian textile worker who set up his own factory in the region after he was laid off. He reported that the luxury brand Dolce & Gabbana used his factory and his workers to meet demand for their handbags.

"They send me the materials and my team stitch, glue and finish the bags. I pay my 100 workers £2 an hour, but they are happy. They sleep in a dormitory above the workshop and I feed them. D&G sell the bags for up to £1,000."

Other leading brands with operations in the area include Gucci and Prada. In the past decade, a dense network of over 2,000 factories has been established on industrial estates in Prato employing, according to some sources, up to 50,000 immigrant workers.

Video recordings of the conditions prevailing in the Prato factories show dozens of Chinese workers huddled over sewing machines. The workers are expected to work between 10 and 15 hours a day. Most of the workers lack proper papers and are effectively indentured to the factory owners. They receive board and lodgings, but their income is completely insecure. Should the factory owner refuse to employ them

further, they face immediate deportation from the country.

One video taken during a police raid of one of the factories shows a boarded off corner of the factory floor with communal beds where the workers slept at night.

In addition to being forced to work like slaves, the immigrant workers confront the racism of the Italian political and business establishment, which is increasingly seeking to make foreign workers the scapegoat for the disastrous social consequences of their own policies of spending cuts and austerity.

Commenting on the influx of Chinese workers into the city, the president of Prato's Chamber of Commerce declared a few years ago: "We underestimated them. What they're doing here is called unfair competition. We need an operation like the one in Iraq to keep them under control."

In response to the deaths on Sunday, the mayor of Prato, Roberto Cenni, a textile manufacturer, declared that there were "thousands of situations potentially as tragic as this one" in the industrial zone around the city. Cenni said he had been in contact with Italian Interior Minister Angelino Alfano to combat the illegal "parallel district" that had grown up around the workshops.

Cenni's words are a threat to immigrant workers in the region. Alfano, who recently split with former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's People of Freedom party, has already made clear that whipping up racism and persecuting immigrant workers will be a central policy plank of his new party (New Centre-Right).

The Five Stars Movement of Beppe Grillo, which entered the Italian parliament for the first time at the start of this year, is notorious for its agitation against immigrants. (See: "Beppe Grillo agitates against immigrants")

The principal political force in the region of Tuscany, however, is the Democratic Party (PD), led by the mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, a contender for the leadership of the PD nationally. The recent case of Caterina Marini, a former regional secretary of the PD in Prato, made clear that fierce hostility towards immigrants is also rife within the Democratic Party.

Following an incident involving her sister in June, Marini sent out an email in which she ranted against a "foreign pack of thieves who deserved to die." When asked to withdraw her racist comments, Marini refused

to back down, declaring that in her opinion the issue of crime and immigration were intimately linked.

The trade unions are firmly in the pocket of the PD and the big textile manufacturers. In March, the leaders of Italy's three biggest unions signed a "historic pact" with the Italian Employers Federation to regulate working conditions in factories. They have repeatedly made clear that, despite the occasional criticism, they will continue to support the austerity measures introduced by PD Prime Minister Enrico Letta.



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