

Deadly auto parts plant explosion in China

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An explosion at a Chinese auto parts factory has killed 71 workers and injured at least 186. The blast occurred at the Kunshan Zhongrong Metal Products Company in Kunshan, Jiangsu province, on Saturday morning. The city is located about 1,000 kilometers southeast of Beijing.

Working conditions in China are notoriously dangerous, highlighted once again by this latest tragedy. In the first half of 2014 alone, there have been 19 serious accidents leading to the deaths of more than 200 people.

According to the state-owned Xinhua news agency, the Taiwan-owned Zhongrong plant employed 450 workers. It specialized in aluminum processing and made car wheel hubs. Zhongrong is used by Dicastal, a Chinese manufacturer of aluminum wheels. General Motors, Volkswagen and Toyota are among Dicastal's customers.

Xinhua reported that there were 264 workers in the factory at the time of the explosion. Preliminary investigations have suggested that the blast was caused by an exposed flame in a room filled with combustible dust. China Central Television stated that about 45 workers were killed in the initial blast and over 20 died after arriving at a nearby hospital. Others were admitted to the hospital with severe burn injuries. Many of the injured, who appeared badly burnt in scorched clothing, were shown laying on wooden pallets and being stretchered on to trucks, public buses and ambulances.

Zhou Xu, who was working at a nearby factory, told Reuters on Saturday, "We heard a really loud blast at about 7 a.m. this morning so we rushed out of our dormitories. First the ambulance came, then as the news surfaced in the media, many families—especially the wives—rushed to the site to see if their husbands were okay."

The *South China Morning Post* reported this morning that "the dangerous, dusty work conditions

that sparked the blast had been known about for years. The city's work safety regulator said it had warned the factory of the potential for an explosion several times, but it was ignored."

Other news stories stated that the high death toll was a result of locked doors at the factory. The doors were locked in order to prevent workers from using the rest room or taking breaks. This is a common practice at Chinese factories throughout various industries.

Saturday's explosion was the worst industrial accident in little more than a year. In June 2013, a fire at a poultry plant killed 119 people. Like the Zhongrong plant, all the doors at the poultry factory, save one, were locked, making it nearly impossible for workers to find their way out. Sixty-two people were killed last November in Qingdao when an oil pipeline exploded.

Chinese President Xi Jinping called for harsh punishments for those responsible for the accident and five company executives have been detained as a part of an investigation into the blast. Any punishments handed down against the company, however, will be merely for show. The crime, as far as the Chinese state and the international corporations are concerned, is thrusting the harsh conditions that Chinese workers face every day into the international spotlight.

Responsibility for Saturday's explosion lies not only with Zhongrong and Dicastal but with corporations like GM that use these suppliers. The constant demand for cheap labor makes the conditions at the Zhongrong factory the rule, not the exception. Factory owners are expected to ignore safety in order to maximize profit. In 2011, an explosion caused by aluminum dust at an Apple factory in Shanghai killed 59 workers.

GM, the US auto company, has attempted to distance itself from Zhongrong simply stating, "We can confirm Zhongrong is a supplier to GM's global supplier Dicastal."

Some international corporations operating in China have taken cosmetic steps to prevent industrial accidents but nothing has fundamentally changed. After a series of suicides by workers shed light on the oppressive conditions faced by workers at Foxconn, which assembles electronics for Apple and Microsoft, the company installed nets in its buildings to try to prevent workers from leaping to their deaths.

Companies like GM, Apple, and others that employ Chinese firms demand these slave-like conditions under threat of moving their business to companies that will enforce them. At the same time, when a local company comes under fire for its brutal exploitation, the international corporation merely cuts its ties with the offending company, issues a statement claiming to oppose the practices, and then moves on to the next supplier that utilizes the same methods as the previous one.

Korean electronics company Samsung, for example, recently cut ties with Shinyang Electronics, stating, “Samsung decided to temporarily suspend business with the factory in question as it found evidence of suspected child labor at the worksite.” As child labor is rife throughout the industry, Samsung’s decision is not based on a rejection of child labor but rather of a company which brought the unwanted negative publicity.

Samsung is hardly the only company that indirectly employs child labor to meet its production demands. Apple admitted in 2010 that three of its China factories used child labor. Last August, Jiangxi Lianchuang Electronics Company was found to employ children as young as 12, who were forced to endure 11-hour workdays with hardly any breaks.

Companies like GM are flocking to China to take advantage of the low wages and deplorable working conditions. Last year, GM announced it was planning to open four new factories in China during the next three years. It also announced that it was eliminating whole shifts and entire plants, affecting GM’s Gunsan factory in South Korea and GM Holden in Australia. Other auto companies like Hyundai are also planning to open new Chinese factories in the future.

Coincidentally on July 25, GM China was deemed to be the fourth-best Fortune 500 company with regard to corporate responsibility at the 2014 Corporate Social Responsibility Annual Conference in Beijing. “GM

China has launched a range of programs across the country supporting environmental protection, road safety and public health. Our employees, partners and the public have also gotten involved to help create a greener, safer and healthier community,” declared Albert Xie, GM China’s vice president of public policy and government relations.

Saturday’s accident further demonstrates how meaningless these claims of corporate responsibility are. The bottom line is the drive for profit which overrides every other consideration including the lives of workers.



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