

India: Four workers killed in Tamil Nadu plastic depot blaze

Our correspondents
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Four young plastic workers were burnt to death last week in a fire at the Rajakani Traders plastic scrap and recycling depot at Tiruverkadu, a suburb of Chennai, the capital of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

The victims—S. Raghu Kumar, S. Sarath Kumar, Amar (all 26) and Raja (25)—were asleep in a small area within the premises and trapped when the fire broke out on August 21. A security guard was fortunate to escape.

Plastic scrap was stored inside the premises, with plastic, rubber and papers piled up outside the building. The cause of the fire is not yet known, but the police arrested the depot owner.

Rajakani Traders has been operating for about eight years despite repeated local complaints about the location of the depot—and many other factories—in a residential area, in violation of regulations. State authorities, however, took no action. Corruption is rampant, permitting tens of thousands of Tamil Nadu factories to operate without mandatory safety and environmental clearances from the state's handful of inspectors.

A day after the tragedy, another fire erupted at a Chennai electronics shop. Two days later, a chemical explosion killed one man and injured two others at a plant on the city's outskirts.

Neither the central Indian government nor successive Tamil Nadu governments, including the current All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam administration, has taken any action to prevent the growing number of industrial accidents.

Accurate statistics on industrial casualties in India are difficult to obtain. According to a 2009 International Labor Organisation report, over 40,000 workers die of occupational diseases or in workplace accidents in India each year, or more than 1,000 every day. Another report revealed that 11 workers die in industrial

accidents for every 100,000 employees. The US ratio was two per 100,000 and Japan's less than one per 100,000.

The dangerous conditions at Rajakani Traders are common to major and small ventures throughout India. The depot employed 25 daily wage workers—mostly women aged between 44 and 65. The women were paid 150 rupees (\$US2.48) per day and male workers double that amount. There was no pension fund or medical insurance scheme.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with Rajakani Traders employees and nearby residents following the tragic incident.

Prabhakaran, a 43-year-old local resident, recounted: "On Wednesday night at around 11.50 I heard a big noise. When I saw the fire at the plastic depot, I called the nearby fire station. It should take only 10 minutes for firefighters to arrive but when officials didn't respond to my call, I phoned my brother living near the fire station to inform them.

"The fire brigade arrived 20 minutes later but they had to call for more help. The fire was put out after three hours by 40 firefighters. By that time, however, the four workers trapped inside the room were burnt to death."

Prabhakaran said that if the fire brigade had arrived sooner, the workers' lives would have been saved. And if the blaze had spread to the nearby residential area, it would have been catastrophic.

Rajeswari, 65, who lives near the plastics depot, said: "At midnight the police knocked on my door and told us to move away from the fire. When I opened the door, I was suddenly taken aback by extreme heat from the plastic factory. My eyes were shut and it felt like fire burning on me. I immediately poured water on my face to cool off but I've now got heat blisters on my

forehead. The overwhelming heat forced residents to run away from their homes and move to a more distant place.

“The people in this neighbourhood were all opposed to setting up this plastics factory and a granite factory in our proximity. We told the owner of this plastic factory to shut down the depot because it was not suitable in a residential area. Though he agreed to vacate months ago, nothing was done about it.”

Rajakani Traders worker **Ramayee**, 65, explained: “I was shocked and saddened by the death of four young people. They are like my sons. I’ve been working for three years in this plastic factory. My starting wage was 90 rupees per day and from early this year I received 150 rupees per day. We work from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., with a one-hour lunch break in between. Apart from our wages, we’re not entitled to any other benefits.

“I have three sons. My husband is a sick patient. He is not working. I don’t get support from my sons because they are struggling hard to manage their everyday life. Now that the factory has been burnt down, I may not get any other work and my life is going to be difficult.”

Pasupathy said: “I’ve lived in Kaduvetti village for 45 years and have no family. I started work as a coolie at this factory nine years ago. I’m barely able to survive with this job, but I’m 65 now and may not get any other job after this. I’m living in a small room and pay 1,000 rupees monthly rent.”

“Whatever political parties come to power there are no fundamental changes or benefits for us.”

WSWS reporters visited the Kilpauk medical college where the deceased workers’ bodies were being kept. Some victims’ relatives explained that they could not afford to take the bodies back to their distant villages.

One of the dead workers, S. Raghu Kumar, was from Thiruchendur in Tamil Nadu’s south. He was from a family of agricultural workers who depended on his income. Raghu Kumar’s father is handicapped and his mother is sick.

S. Sarath Kumar, another fire victim, was a village carpenter from the Kanchipuram district. His brother told the WSWS: “I’m also a carpenter and get 400 rupees a day but I don’t have regular work. [Tamil Nadu chief minister] Jayalalithaa has not announced any compensation for the fire victims and so we have to spend our own money for all the expenses.”



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