

The Tianjin explosions and the discrediting of capitalism

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The official death toll from the massive explosions that devastated a substantial area of the port of Tianjin on Thursday night has reached 57. The number of fatalities is expected to rise significantly, as hospitals try to save critically injured patients among the more than 700 being treated across the Chinese city of 14 million people.

The information filtering out as to the cause of the disaster has triggered open recriminations against the regime of the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Reports indicate that a warehouse operated by Rui Hai International Logistics, a company started in 2011, was storing up to 700 tonnes of highly dangerous sodium cyanide and unspecified quantities of calcium carbide. Containers holding these substances will explode when heated. The fire-fighting crews sent to combat a blaze at the warehouse were not told about the chemicals. At least 21 emergency workers died in the blasts that followed.

Hundreds of port workers were sleeping barely 600 metres away in overcrowded dormitories. Some 90,000 people live within a five kilometre radius of the warehouse. If the explosions had taken place during the day, when the streets and buildings surrounding the docks were bustling with human traffic, the carnage would have been far worse.

The CCP government in Beijing is nervous over the public reaction to the Tianjin explosions, which have demonstrated again the consequences of the unchecked capitalist development over which it has presided for more than 35 years. According to official reports, Rui Hai International Logistics was storing deadly chemicals without the knowledge of, or intervention by, any authorities. The company's owners and management are being hunted down and arrested. They will more than likely face execution or draconian prison

sentences after highly public trials, in an effort to deflect any scrutiny of the broader issues posed by the disaster.

The claim that “no-one knew” about the chemicals has been greeted with disbelief and anger. The popular outrage, expressed on social media and in comments to online news reports, has only been heightened by the fact that this flagrant and criminal indifference to public safety took place in Tianjin.

Tianjin's port is the tenth largest in the world and the seventh largest in China. It receives the largest number of imported cars of any Chinese port, as well as massive quantities of iron ore, coal, oil and other natural resources needed to supply the industrial complexes and power plants of northern China.

The city itself is China's fourth largest and, due to its strategic and economic importance as the transport, industrial and technical hub for the capital Beijing, is under the direct political administration of the Housing Ministry of the central CCP government.

In the regime's propaganda, Tianjin, along with Beijing and the adjoining Heibei province, will be developed into the world's greatest continuous “mega-city” by 2020, with a population of 130 million people who will purportedly be able to enjoy the best jobs and highest incomes in China.

Thursday's explosions have sheeted home the social reality: whether in Tianjin or a remote village, the well-being of the Chinese working class is subordinated by the regime to the immediate requirements of transnational and national corporations, and the accumulation of profit for the capitalist elite who own them.

Since the CCP initiated the restoration of capitalist relations in 1979, it has utilised its military and police apparatus to brutally repress all opposition by workers

to ruthless exploitation and facilitate China's transformation into the centre of global low-wage manufacturing.

Substandard safety practices are the norm, not the exception. Andy Furlong, director of policy at the Institution Chemical Engineers in London, told the *Guardian*: "The view expressed to us very recently by Chinese experts was that in the field of chemical storage their technologies are outdated, some of the equipment they use is primitive, safety management is poor and employee training is not up to scratch."

Similar comments could be made regarding every sector of the economy and the human cost is staggering.

In 2014, 68,061 Chinese workers were killed in workplace "accidents"—more than 185 per day—and hundreds of thousands more injured. In just the last 24 hours, a gas explosion in a coal mine in Guizhou province has killed 13 miners. In Shaanxi province, 64 miners and their families have been buried alive inside poorly built dormitories by a landslide triggered by a deluge of rain.

According to state media, some 1,600 people, mainly better paid professionals, die at their place of employment each day from the phenomenon known as *guolaosi*, or extreme overwork.

The air, soil and water systems are thoroughly contaminated in most urban centres due to unchecked industrial operations and development, to the extent that it is estimated that more than 4,400 people die each day—1.6 million per year—from the effects of pollution.

Scandals have wracked food safety, with contaminated milk powder sickening more than 300,000 people and killing six babies in 2008. The capsizing of a ferry on the Yangtze River in June, killing more than 400 people, was only the most high profile of regular transport disasters that are generally linked to safety violations.

All the CCP's promises that the Chinese masses would ultimately benefit from rampant capitalist development over the past 36 years are in tatters. The regime's legitimacy is already under question, rocked by the slowing economy, a stock market collapse, a slump in property prices, environmental crises, endemic official corruption and ever widening social inequality. The CCP's rule, along with the capitalist market itself, will be further discredited by the Tianjin

disaster.

The political fall-out from the Tianjin explosions is being watched no less anxiously by transnational corporations and banks, as well as by governments around the world. Any disruption to the corporate profits extracted from the Chinese masses by the development of large-scale social unrest will deepen the economic slump internationally and potentially trigger panic in financial markets. For global capitalism, in other words, any effort to change the conditions in China that give rise to disasters such as the Tianjin explosions would be a catastrophe.

That fact underscores the historic bankruptcy of the profit system and the urgency of forging the unity of the Chinese and international working class, in the common political struggle to end capitalism and establish a world planned socialist economy.



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