

Chinese power plant explosion kills 21

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At least 21 people were killed, and five critically injured, by an explosion at a coal-fired power plant in central China last Thursday.

Asia Times reported that the incident occurred when a high-pressure steam pipe exploded at the plant at around 3:20 p.m. The pipe burst and started leaking during testing, according to Xinhua, the state news agency. The cause of the blast has not been immediately determined.

The plant is currently under construction in the city of Dangyang in Hubei Province. It is owned by the Madian Gangue Power Generation Company, which generates thermal power and sells slag, ash and petroleum products. A spokesman of the Dangyang government propaganda office told the *New York Times* that an investigation was underway and the government would release more details later.

Du Qiuxin, a villager who lives a kilometre from the plant, told Xinhua: “I was woken up by a loud bang which lasted for several minutes.” The news agency reported that a dozen emergency vehicles were seen at the factory gates and an unspecified number of injured were rushed to hospital.

The power plant uses coal gangue, also known as low-calorific coal, which is a waste product from the mining and processing of coal. Although coal gangue has relatively low energy value, and is considered more environmentally harmful than other types of coal, some central government officials and provincial governments have pursued approvals for more plants burning the gangue so that it is not left piling up at mine sites.

China’s industrial disasters are not “accidents,” but involve the systemic sacrifice of the health and safety of workers and residents for profit. The latest blast came a day before the first anniversary of large explosions that killed at least 165 people in the northern port of Tianjin.

The explosions at the Tianjin facility, which was storing more than 11,000 tonnes of chemicals and hazardous goods, sparked widespread anger over negligence by factory management and the lack of openness by officials about the cause of the disaster and its possible environmental impact. Ten chemical plants were later moved after being found to be too close to residential areas around the city.

Authorities in February released the findings from an official investigation, which recommended that 123 government employees be punished for offences, including dereliction of duty. Investigators blamed more than 10 government departments for their role in the disaster—from work safety and environmental protection officials, to customs, the police and planners—for failing to supervise and oversee the warehouse. The report also found that legal loopholes and lax implementation of regulations contributed to the catastrophe.

The State Council investigation was designed to close the matter down, and there has been almost no follow-up in the official media. Local residents, who remain deeply concerned about possible chemical contamination of the area, were forced to start moving back in June when the government stopped contributing financially toward alternative accommodation.

The authorities are trying to persuade the public and the media that those responsible for the Tianjin disaster have been punished, and that it is now time for everything to return to normal. Huge billboards placed around the vast denuded blast site call on people to unite in the construction of a “bright future” and “not dwell on the past.”

Anger over callous disregard for safety standards, corruption and bureaucratic cover-ups is growing after three decades of economic deregulation and the relentless pursuit of profits that has characterised China’s anarchic economic expansion under capitalist

restoration.

In the wake of the Tianjin report, the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* said questions remained over whether China had “really learned lessons from the Tianjin blasts.” While thousands of firms produce and store hazardous chemicals across the country, only six provinces make their information publicly available. Liu Chunlei, the head of Qingyue Environmental Information, said even in those six provinces, the information on the type and amount of chemicals used or stored was not complete. Few provinces made it clear where the potentially dangerous enterprises were located.

In order to quell deepening popular hostility, the State Administration of Work Safety published new regulations in June requiring companies to devise detailed contingency plans for workplace accidents. The revised measures give more detailed guidance to companies on writing, implementing, publicising and filing contingency plans for workplace accidents. The new rules also hike the penalties for violations.

Substandard safety practices are the norm, not the exception, and the regulations will change very little. Any disruption to the corporate profits extracted from the Chinese working class would only deepen the economic slump within China and globally.

According to the China Labour Bulletin (CLB), the latest official figures show that there were 28,115 workplace accidents and 16,059 deaths reported in the first seven months of this year. The majority stem from small-scale incidents that never get reported in the official media. In a “fairly typical” month for accidents in May, the CLB listed 11 separate incidents with a total of 16 fatalities. The most common causes of workplace accidents are structural and mechanical failures, particularly during maintenance or repair work, and traffic accidents, such as street cleaners being hit by cars.

Major explosions, like the one in Danyang, represent a small proportion of the overall number of accidents. CLB’s Work Accident Map has recorded 37 explosions this year. In January, three people died when blasts swept a fireworks plant in Jiangxi Province. In April, a chemical fire burned for 16 hours in the coastal province of Jiangsu after an explosion at a facility storing chemicals and fuel, requiring 400 firefighters to put it out.

Many of the workers injured or killed in these incidents struggle to get a fraction of the compensation they are entitled to by law. Many poor and vulnerable workers in remote areas in China are lucky to get anything at all, especially if their employer is in league with local government officials who can cover the accidents up.



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