

Fire in Chinese workers' dormitory kills 22

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7 August 2017

A recent fire in the city of Changshu in Jiangsu province has once again drawn attention to the poor and dangerous conditions endured by millions of China's internal migrant workers.

The blaze broke out on July 14 in a two-storey residential building at 4.30 a.m. and quickly enveloped the structure. Around 71 firefighters and 13 fire engines were called and it was over an hour before the flames were extinguished. Tragically, the fire killed 22 people and injured another three.

There was little chance for residents to escape the blaze. Various reports, including the State Administration of Work Safety, have stated that the doors were locked from the outside and all the windows had security grills. Only six people managed to get out of the building.

The building was being rented out by a nearby restaurant for 29 of its staff. A fellow employee told the Chinese media that all of the victims were colleagues, including waiters, waitresses and chefs, and young, 25 years on average, and from all over China.

The police reportedly found traces of petrol at the scene and began an arson investigation. According to China News Service, a suspect was captured hours later hiding inside a water tank, and additional suspects were identified by surveillance footage.

Arson attacks have occurred in the past as a result of workplace disputes, in which the frustration has boiled over.

In 2012, a worker angry over unpaid wages of 3,000 yuan (\$461), set an under-garment factory in Guangdong, southern China on fire. The blaze killed 14 female workers and left one seriously injured. All were young workers between the ages of 18 and 20, who were unable to escape because of barred windows.

The grievance over wages extended back three years after the worker quit the factory. He told the Guangdong TV broadcaster, "The whole time, I've

been very impulsive, very angry about this... so I did these things." When asked if he regretted the loss of life from the fire, he replied that he "didn't think about these things."

It is unclear whether last month's fire was arson and, if it was, what provoked the attack. No motive was made public and the fire quickly dropped out of the news.

It is common for employers to provide accommodation for their staff, as many poorly-paid workers, particularly migrants, cannot afford to live in decent housing in the cities. Such houses and dormitories are typically fire traps with cramped conditions and lacking fire exits or fire extinguishers. Faulty wiring can start fires.

In Beijing, one of the most unaffordable cities in China, hundreds of workers were recently discovered living underneath a luxury apartment complex. More than 400 migrant workers were crammed into an old air raid shelter located under the spacious "Julong Gardens." The shelter had been subdivided into dormitories with kitchens.

One resident expressed safety concerns to the media over the use of rice cookers and fridges, as well as a gas tank. One room was reserved for smokers. There were no windows for ventilation, and only one fire exit. According to one estimate, a million Chinese migrants are living in such underground bunkers and bomb shelters.

Employers are seldom prosecuted. Recently a landlord in Sanya, Hainan province, was jailed for 15 days over a fire at his flat which he had leased to 72 tenants, according to *Hainan Daily*. No casualties were reported in that fire.

China is currently in the midst of a speculative housing bubble. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the real estate sector in 2007 accounted for 10 percent of China's gross domestic product, but by 2017 it

accounts for 30 percent driving up prices and rents.

A study in 2016 by the Global Cities Business Alliance also showed that employees in Beijing with average incomes, such as nurses, teachers and bus drivers, often paid rental rates of between 1.1 and 1.5 times their incomes.

Millions of migrant workers coming to the cities from rural areas simply cannot afford decent accommodation, compounding their oppressive conditions.

Internal migrants are still subject to what amounts to a *hukou* system, instituted under Mao in the 1950s, which makes them second-class citizens. Unlike urban residents, they do not have access to basic services including welfare, education, health, housing and pensions.

The system was designed to control the movement of people and the uneven development in a rapidly industrialising economy. Now, however, corporations rely on this underclass of poorly paid and highly exploited workers. There are currently 282 million people in China classified as rural migrants, constituting over a third of the labour force.

The poor conditions facing migrants means that many families are split between the city and the countryside for most of the year. Over 61 million “left behind children” are isolated from their parents in the country and suffer as a consequence. Cases have been reported of children dying of starvation and drowning due to neglect.

The profits extracted from rural migrant workers have led to the rapid growth of a super wealthy elite. Last year, Greater China accounted for five of the world’s “top 10 billionaire cities,” according to the *Hurun Report*. Beijing overtook New York as the city with the most billionaires, 100 to 95 respectively.



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