

Indian power plant explosion kills at least 35 workers

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At least 35 workers were killed and some 87 injured in a deadly explosion at a state-owned power plant in northern India last Wednesday. The National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) plant is located at Unchahar, near Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh.

In a statement, the company said the disaster began in unit number six of the facility, when “there was a sudden abnormal sound at 20-metre elevation and there was an opening in corner number two from which hot flue gases and steam escaped affecting the people working around the area.”

Already, it is clear that the deadly explosion was a product of lax safety practices.

The facility reportedly has a workforce of around 870. Many of them are migrant workers employed on a daily wage of just 200 rupees (\$US3) a day.

An injured employee told *First Post* he was hit by a sudden gush of hot ash-like material. Like many of the injured, he received severe burns.

First Post quoted an unnamed officer of the plant who indicated that the real death toll may be far greater than has been acknowledged.

“I know that more than 70 people have been killed in this tragedy,” the officer said. “I was one of the persons to visit unit with the NDRF [National Disaster Response Force] team and I know that many labourers were reduced to ashes in this accident.” As many as 150 workers may have been in the plant at the time of the blast.

Mantu Barua, one of the survivors, told the media of horrific scenes. “It rained fire there,” Barua said. “Many of my friends got burnt alive and I could do nothing.”

Devastated workers’ families launched a protest outside the complex last week, alleging more bodies were buried under the ash and rubble. They said that

several workers remained unaccounted for.

Resources in the burn and plastic surgery unit of the local Civil Hospital have been inadequate for the scale of the crisis.

R.P. Singh, a senior doctor at the hospital, told *First Post* he had requested that the victims of the explosion be transferred to a major hospital in New Delhi. “All patients here have more than 50 percent burn injuries,” he said. According to media reports, 15 people were airlifted to other medical facilities.

National and state governments are fearful that the disaster will become a focal point of broader social anger. The authorities have deployed two companies of the Uttar Pradesh Provincial Armed Constabulary to the plant.

Yogi Adityanath, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh and a member of Prime Minister Mahendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party, quickly offered cash compensation. The meagre amounts included 200,000 rupees to the families of the deceased, 50,000 rupees to the severely injured and 25,000 rupees for those who sustained “minor” injuries.

National Power Minister R. K. Singh announced ex-gratia compensation of 2 million rupees to the families of the deceased, one million for seriously injured workers and 200,000 rupees for other wounded workers.

The token compensation is aimed at covering up the responsibility of the NPTC and the government for substandard safety measures. An editorial in the *Deccan Chronicle* noted, “Generous companies may think they are compensating workers’ kin, the truth is that life is cheap in India, even of those tasked with working in dangerous environments.”

The announcements of compensation come as more details are emerging about the possible cause of the

explosion.

The normal task of a boiler in a power plant is to produce steam by burning coal. Clinkers, or bits of stony residue, form, falling down the funnel shaped boiler through a 6–8 inch opening. A steel conveyor belt which runs beneath the opening continuously removes the clinker, which is sprinkled with water to cool it, then crushed and moved out as ash slurry.

“The [boiler] problem occurs when the clinker are bigger in size and end up blocking this opening,” the *Indian Express* wrote last Friday. “The solution then is to shut down the boiler, open a manhole and put the poking rod in to remove the clinker blocks.” The boiler should first be allowed to cool down.

The *Express* commented that “Across thermal projects in India, though, this is a rare practice” because of monetary losses caused by interruptions to production. “[Managements] tend to push operators to undertake a short-cut for de-choking the bottom hopper in violation of safety procedures, and thereby risking lives,” the newspaper stated.

An editorial in the *Hindu* likewise noted that “High pressure boilers are hazardous pieces of equipment, which are strictly regulated with special laws.” The Uttar Pradesh government, it said, “failed miserably” in maintaining these objectives.

The *Hindu* described the accident as “entirely preventable” because boilers are “designed to provide warning as soon as dangerous pressure builds up and trigger automatic safety devices at a critical point. They should undergo periodic inspections to ensure that all features are working and intact.”

Industrial boiler and gas cylinder explosions are common in India with the National Crime Records Bureau reporting 61 deaths caused by such incidents in 2015 alone.

An editorial in the *Economic Times* noted that state-owned Coal India has been “pushing up output by shipping out ever lower grades of coal with very high ash content.” The company provides coal for the NPTC. The editorial asked whether the plant was conducting “any independent assessment of risk and quality norms.”

The NPTC is amassing vast profits on the back of its 24,000 employees. The company’s reported profits were \$US1.5 billion last financial year. It was ranked 300 on last year’s Forbes Global 2000, a list of public

companies around the world with the highest market value and profit.

This is part of a broader pro-business agenda being imposed by the Modi government, which saw India jump 30 positions in the World Bank’s recently released “Ease of Doing Business” report. India now sits at 100 on this list.

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley boasted that it was the “highest jump that any country has ever made in this index.” He said it was a “clear and big acknowledgement of the structural reforms that the Modi government has been undertaking.”

In other words, India is a haven for global capital, based on the destruction of the social rights of ordinary people and the stepped-up exploitation of the working class.



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