

Russia: Siberian shoe factory fire kills 10 workers

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At least ten workers died Thursday in a fire at a shoe factory in a small village in the Siberian region of Novosibirsk. The tragedy is only the latest in a series of workplace accidents and fires which take the lives of at least 15,000 workers in Russia every year.

According to media reports at least seven of them were Chinese immigrant workers. The others might have been from the Central Asian republic Kyrgyzstan, and one might have been from Russia, but other media reports suggest that all victims were Chinese.

The relatively scarce Russian media reports indicate that the fire broke out around 8:47 a.m. local time, and was extinguished only at around 1 p.m. local time, destroying about 2,000 square meters of the factory.

Over 80 firefighters were involved in extinguishing the fire, which quickly released heavily toxic smoke due to the material that were used for producing shoes. According to a local media report, firefighters had great problems extinguishing the fire, because of the way the factory was constructed and because of the extreme cold.

One member of an emergency response team told the news agency Interfax: “[The victims] tried to extinguish the fire before the arrival of the firefighters. However, they died of carbon monoxide poisoning.”

The number of victims might still rise since the factory employed some 30 people, all of them immigrant workers. While the reasons for the fire has not been determined, local media reports suggest that violations of fire safety regulations might have caused the fire.

Factory fires like the one in Siberia are an indictment of capitalist restoration in the former USSR. As far as the Russian oligarchs, and rising entrepreneurs are concerned, anything goes when it comes to exploiting the working class. Even minimum investments in

maintaining or establishing safe working conditions are not made. They have no penalties or punishment to fear. Thus, basic safety provisions are lacking in innumerable workplaces, warehouses, mines and factories in Russia.

The result has been a shockingly high rate of workplace-related deaths. While the Russian government officially reports about 3,000 workplace deaths per year, the International Labor Organization found that the real number was approximately 15,000. Some 190,000 workers die annually as a result of exposure to dangerous conditions at work.

More recent accidents include a fire at an oil factory, operated by Russia’s largest privately-owned oil company Lukoil, which killed at least 4 workers in early October 2017. A few weeks later, in a particularly gruesome incident, a 31-year-old mother was boiled alive in a candy factory, leaving behind a 10-year-old son.

None of these statistics include the millions of immigrant workers who come to Russia, permanently or seasonally, voluntarily or as a result of human trafficking. The majority of them come from the deeply impoverished countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, where wages are lower and unemployment is often higher than in Russia. However, there is also a sizeable immigrant working class population from China, particularly in the Russian Far East.

Often, employers and factory owners feel they can maintain even worse working conditions for immigrant workers who have little to no rights, especially if they are undocumented immigrants or have been the victims of human trafficking, a widespread occurrence throughout the former USSR.

There have been several fires in recent years with high death tolls at factories and workplaces that employ

mostly or exclusively immigrant workers. Thus, at least 17 workers from Tajikistan, the most impoverished of all Central Asian republics, died in a fire at a Moscow textile factory in early 2016. Another 17 workers from Kyrgyzstan died in August of 2016, in a warehouse fire in Moscow.

In addition to the catastrophic conditions in Russia's factories, the deterioration of social conditions has made it difficult or impossible for fire fighters and doctors to help those affected by accidents in time to save their lives. As of 2008, the rate of deaths in fires in Russia was eight per 100,000, eight times higher than it was in the United States, Britain or Greece. In what is geographically the largest country in the world, there are only some 5,000 fire stations. Notably the much smaller Poland has over 15,000 fire stations.



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