

A quarter century since the Thai toy factory fire

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It has been 25 years since the Kader Holdings toy factory fire in Thailand which killed 188 workers and injured about 470 others. The company employed over 3,000 workers, mainly impoverished young women from rural Thailand who were paid about \$US7 a day.

The Kader fire began just after 4.00 p.m. on May 10, 1993 and quickly engulfed three of the four sub-standard concrete and steel buildings at the site. There were no fire extinguishers, alarms, sprinkler systems or proper fire escapes. The blaze was a disaster, and social crime waiting to happen.

Twenty-four hours after blaze was extinguished, rescue workers were still recovering horribly disfigured bodies from the mangled structures. The Kader blaze was the worst since the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in New York City which killed 146 workers, mainly young immigrant women.

Kader Holdings was part of the international toy industry's complex, globally integrated, manufacturing and supply chain. Located on the outskirts of Bangkok, the company produced thousands of stuffed toys and plastic dolls each day for Toys 'R' Us and other multi-billion-dollar retailers in North America, Europe and Australia.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which since 1988 had been systematically examining the emergence and growth of globalized production, recognised the significance of the disaster and despatched a reporting team to Bangkok to investigate.

Detailed on-the-spot reports, which were published in ICFI newspapers, exposed Kader Holdings operations and how the never-ending drive by globally mobile capital for ever-cheaper labour and operating costs produced the disaster. The articles were compiled and published by Mehring Books under the title *Industrial*

Inferno: The story of the Thai Toy Factory Fire.

A quarter century later the essential conclusions of that investigation have been proven completely correct. Whereas the outrage provoked by the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire had resulted in legislation to improve factory safety and conditions, the ICFI warned that the Kader tragedy would not lead to a reform of safety standards in Thailand or anywhere else.

Any attempt to enforce the limited existing building and safety codes in Thailand, let alone enact further protective legislation, would result in a flight of capital to other countries. If Kader Holdings did not move to avoid what it regarded as intolerable new costs of production, the giant toy corporations in the US and Europe would simply shift their orders to where prices were lower.

Industrial Inferno compared global capitalism with the exploitative "slash and burn" rice production in northern Thailand. In "slash and burn" farming, a portion of land is cleared, the timber burned to fertilise the ground and a rice crop planted. When the natural nutrients are exhausted, the farmers move on to another area and repeat the process.

"International capital now employs the same methods, moving into a new area of the globe, uprooting and destroying existing relations of production and transplanting the basic infrastructure required for its operations. Having sucked the lifeblood of one area, it moves on to repeat the process."

On the basis of this analysis, *Industrial Inferno* insisted the "consumer boycotts" and "moral pressure" to force manufacturers to provide safe and healthy work environments were futile. The Kader fire exposed the rapacious character of global capitalism, which was not improving factory conditions but further undermining them, making further industrial tragedies inevitable.

That warning has been tragically confirmed. Governments everywhere, working hand in glove with the trade unions, have been in a race to the bottom, eliminating industrial safety regulations, introducing “self-regulation” and privatising safety inspection. The industrial slaughter continues on a vast scale.

According to the most recent International Labor Organisation figures, accidents and unsafe working conditions killed 2.78 million workers globally in 2017 or the equivalent of one worker every 15 seconds. Two-thirds of those killed were working in factories in Asia—home to the largest cheap labour platforms used by global corporations.

Terrible new industrial death records are being set. It took 82 years for the record death toll in New York’s Triangle Shirtwaist blaze to be surpassed by the Kader fire in Bangkok. But it was only 19 years before an industrial disaster eclipsed the death and injury in Bangkok.

In September 2012, over 300 young garment workers died in a fire at the Ali Enterprises factory just outside Karachi in Pakistan. A few weeks before the blaze, the company was given internationally recognised SAI8000 status, which included a health and safety inspection.

Less than a year later, in April 2013, 1,134 garment workers were killed in Bangladesh when the Rana Plaza building collapsed—setting a new international benchmark for industrial accidents. Workers had warned management about the dangerous state of the building just days before the collapse, but were ordered to remain at work.

In the early 1990s, amid the gloating about the so-called triumph of the market following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, media pundits and politicians of all stripes predicted a new era of peace and prosperity. Capitalist globalisation, it was claimed, would lift countries like Thailand out of poverty and close the gap between rich and poor globally.

In fact, the division between rich and poor has widened in every country and across the world. From 1988 until 2011, the incomes of humanity’s poorest 10 percent increased by less than \$3 a year—less than nothing when adjusted for inflation. Over the same period, the incomes of humanity’s richest 1 percent increased 182 times as much. The world’s billionaires, a miniscule percentage of the world’s population, has a

staggering total net worth of \$6.5 trillion.

Moreover, as the rush for “international competitiveness” to attract capital has intensified, the distinction between the conditions of life for workers in the advanced capitalist countries such as the US and those in Africa, Asia and Latin America has continually eroded.

The central problem confronting the working class everywhere is not the globalisation as such, which has greatly expanded the productive forces, but capitalism with its domination of economic life by private profit and the outmoded nation-state system.

At the same time, globalisation has expanded and integrated the international working class as never before. This is the social force that is capable of abolishing the profit system and refashioning society along socialist lines to meet pressing social needs of the vast majority of working people, including putting an end to industrial disasters such as the Thai toy factory fire.



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