Fire at Japanese animation studio leaves nearly three dozen dead

Ben McGrath
22 July 2019

An arson attack at an animation studio in Kyoto, Japan last Thursday killed 34 people and injured 34 others. Many remained hospitalized, some in critical condition. Police issued an arrest warrant for the alleged attacker, Shinji Aoba, 41, who suffered burns during the attack and remains unconscious in hospital. It was the deadliest fire in Japan since a suspected arson attack in 2001 killed 44 people.

Aoba is alleged to have entered Kyoto Animation Thursday around 10:30 a.m. after purchasing two twenty-litre tanks filled with gasoline from a nearby gas station. He is then said to have dumped the gasoline on the ground and ignited it while shouting "Die!" There were 74 people in the studios at the time.

Kyoto Animation is known for manga and TV and movie anime, including *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*, *Lucky Star* and *K-On!*. Nobuyuki Tsugata, an animation historian in the Department of Cinema at Nihon University College of Art, called the studio "unique in the industry" for its use of colour.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe offered a perfunctory statement on Twitter, saying: "It's so dreadful that I'm lost for words." As is typical in responses from the ruling class in such cases, empty words of grief were offered, avoiding any connection between the tragedy and declining social and economic conditions.

The media described Aoba as a disturbed loner who got into confrontations with his neighbours, including an incident only days before the fire. He was convicted of robbing a convenience store in 2012 and sentenced to three and half years in jail. Aoba lived alone in Saitama city, near Tokyo and was receiving treatment for a mental illness.

Upon being detained by police, Aoba supposedly declared "I did it" and said the studio "ripped me off," accusing it of stealing a novel he had written. A witness who saw him detained, stated: "He sounded like he had a grudge against society, and he was talking angrily to the policemen, too, though he was struggling with pain."

Hideaki Hatta, the company president, said the studio had had no contact with Aoba before the attack, although the company had recently received anonymous death threats. "They were addressed to our office and sales department and told us to die," Hatta stated.

Thursday's fire spread rapidly through the relatively small, three-storey building located in Kyoto's Fushimi Ward. Experts in architecture and fire safety pointed to the building's structure as a contributing factor in the high death toll. According to authorities, only five people were killed by the flames themselves. Most died from carbon monoxide poisoning. Nineteen people were found in a stairwell leading from the third floor to the building's roof.

"The structure of the building was that it had one spiral staircase penetrating through three floors acting as a chimney, the most effective way of starting a fire," Momoko Higuchi, a Tokyo-based architect, said. "Because the fire was with petrol, the effect was like a bomb. Most died of smoke."

One of those who escaped the blaze told Japan's public broadcaster NHK: "A black mushroom cloud billowed up the stairs, perhaps within 15 seconds, then everything went black, like pouring black ink all over the place. I couldn't see anything."

Shinichi Sugawara, an expert in structural fire engineering and professor emeritus at Tokyo University, said a backdraft was possible—a situation in which heat from a blaze shatters windows, allowing outside air to rush into and fuel a fire, increasing its intensity.

© World Socialist Web Site

Other factors pointed to a lack of fire safety. While the door to the roof was supposedly not locked, one employee said the door was “a rare type” with two metal levers that had to be moved at the same time. He said he was “not good at opening the door at first.” Given the high stress of the situation as well as the blinding conditions, it is probable that the door presented an unexpected barrier to the employees’ escape.

The building also lacked sprinklers and fire shutters in the stairwell. Due to the size of the building, it was apparently exempt from installing those safety measures. Professor Sugawara commented: “I personally think that all places like that should have shutters, and all buildings should have sprinklers, regardless of size.” Yet the Kyoto Animation studios passed a safety inspection last October.

As with similar tragedies, accidents happen, but their severity is too often the result of decaying capitalist society. Businesses are exempt from implementing life-saving measures in the name of cost savings, and individuals suffering mental ill-health under the highly exploitative corporate profit system have nowhere to turn for help.

Those suffering from mental health issues are at a particular disadvantage in Japan where stigma is still attached to those seeking help with a variety of conditions ranging from depression to dissociative identity disorder. Only about one in three people suffering from severe mental health issues receives treatment. While rates of suicide in Japan have fallen in recent years, it is still the leading cause of death for people between 10 and 39.

None of this absolves Aoba, but the standard response from the state to these types of tragedies is to vilify the accused, overlook or ignore safety violations or concerns, and use the attack as justification for building up the police force to be deployed against the working class and growing social discontent.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site