

Factory explosion in central Chinese city kills 15

Robert Campion
30 July 2019

A gas plant explosion in Henan province this month killed 15 people, with another 15 seriously wounded. The blast occurred in the air separation unit of a coal-to-gas factory in Yima City, around 5:45 p.m. on July 19.

The blast is another reminder of the official lack of regard for the safety of workers in Chinese factories and for that of residents living near factories.

The explosion shattered glass windows and propelled doors off their hinges within a three-kilometre radius. Streets were littered with debris. A number of houses collapsed, including one 500 metres from the site, injuring an eight-month-old child, according to the state-owned video news agency CCTV+.

The toll could have been worse. A local school was caught in the blast zone but avoided casualties because its students were on summer vacation. As it was, the explosion was so large that 46 fire trucks and 270 firefighters were mobilised to the blast site, as well as 90 medical workers and 30 ambulances.

Like many hazardous facilities in China, the Yima plant was built near residential areas, with no regard for the potential impact on people in the area. A local resident said: “The sound was extremely loud with a ball of fire and clouds of smoke in the air.” Another resident, surnamed Tang, said her home was outside the blast radius and she only experienced “vibrations and a bad smell.” But her friends’ homes had been destroyed. They were “currently homeless,” she said.

Coal gasification plants are a key technology in oil refining, power generation and metallurgical industries. They often handle highly flammable or toxic substances, such as chemical fertilisers and methanol.

Residents feared a secondary explosion, lacking any faith in the authorities to protect local people. In response to these concerns, the Yima municipal government issued a circular saying the public security

department would crack down on “rumour-mongers.”

Owned by the Henan Energy and Chemical Group, the plant employs 1,200 people. Officials had recently declared it to be one of the top safety-compliant workplaces in Henan. It was one of 72 “province-level benchmark enterprises” for risk prevention. It also received a China Chemical Safety Association award in January for an “extraordinary contribution” to chemical industry safety standards.

However, according to the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs (IPE), a non-profit based in Beijing, the Yima factory had a record of excessive emissions and the company was fined several times by the local environmental department between 2014 and 2016.

Matt Hyu from *Reach24h Consulting* in Hangzhou told *Chemistry World* recently that enforcement agencies were under-resourced and unable to address safety issues competently. “Many local enforcement staff do not have enough professional knowledge of chemical engineering,” he stated. “Besides, there are many small plants, so it’s very difficult to inspect them all.”

This is the reality facing millions of workers and residents. In many cases, investigators are simply not prepared properly. In the worst cases, investigators actively cover up violations. In November, a gas plant in the northern city of Zhangjiakou claimed the lives of 24 people while injuring another 21. Authorities claimed that the firm responsible had concealed information and misled investigators.

Such accidents also pollute working class neighbourhoods. CCTV+ reported that Lu Huachao, deputy director of Sanmenxia City’s Eco-environment Protection Bureau, said contaminated water from the Yima explosion had flowed into the local Jianhe river

and was being treated and quarantined. A Yima government official announced two days later that the air and water had been brought back to within standards, despite concerns about the pungent smell in the air.

IPE director Ma Jun told the *Global Times* that “within standards” did not indicate no pollution. While the gas could quickly disperse and would not affect people in an immediately noticeably manner, the water and soil could still be polluted.

Environmental testing operations have been severely compromised, especially since the privatisation of these operations in 2015. Chinese newspaper *Caixin* reported in January that “glaring falsifications and outright corruption persist” throughout the process, leading to “chaos.”

The frequency and severity of industrial “accidents” in China is a product of the systemic exploitation of the working class and the slashing of environmental and safety standards, which has generated rampant wealth accumulation for the capitalist class over the past three decades. Whatever the unsafe and corrupt practices of private industry, the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party leadership is responsible for enforcing the conditions for them to flourish.

After a 2015 explosion in Tianjin that claimed the lives of 173 people, the Beijing government claimed it would undertake serious measures to locate and move potentially hazardous chemical facilities away from residential areas.

The Yima plant was identified in 2016 as posing a “significant risk” to residents but nothing was done to address the situation.

On March 21, a similar blast at a chemical plant in Yancheng, in eastern China’s Jiangsu province killed 78 people and injured hundreds, blowing out the windows of nearby homes. The “Work Accident Map” compiled by *China Labour Bulletin* has recorded 34 deadly fires and explosions in chemical plants and storage facilities since 2015.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact