

# Neyveli Thermal plant explosion in southern India kills 13 workers

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The massive July 1 explosion in a thermal power plant which killed 13 workers at the government-owned Neyveli Lignite Corporation India Ltd (NLC) in Tamil Nadu was the second fatal blast at the company in just two months.

The latest tragic loss of life was not simply an accident, but an industrial catastrophe waiting to happen and the result of management's criminal refusal to take action following the death of eight workers in the previous explosion on May 7. As in previous accidents, this month's blast further underscores how capitalist production places profit interests above the lives of workers, disregarding even the most basic safety requirements.

On July 1, six NLC contract workers—Ramanathan, Nagaraj, Venkatesa Permal, Silambarasan, Arun Kumar and Padmanabhan—died on the spot and 17 employees, including permanent and contract workers, a junior engineer and two supervisors, were badly injured and hospitalised. Seven out of the 17 later succumbed to their injuries having been initially taken to an NLC-run hospital in Neyveli and then shifted to the private Appollo hospital, in Chennai, the Tamil Nadu state capital.

The NLC is a highly-profitable, central government-owned corporation, which mines lignite and generates electricity. It has four open cut mines with an annual capacity of about 30 million tonnes in Neyveli, and an open cut operation at Barsingsar in Rajasthan state. NLC also owns four thermal electric power stations in Neyveli and one at Barsingsar.

The May 7 explosion occurred after NLC resumed operations on April 8 at the plant without carrying out mandatory maintenance and safety procedures after the national government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi ended lockdown measures. This callous disregard for

workers safety and the Indian government's determination to "reopen the economy" has seen a rapid spread of the coronavirus in Tamil Nadu and across the country.

According to *hotindiareport.com*, the July 1 explosion was in Unit V of TPS II, an outdated boiler that had shut down late on June 30. Workers and engineering staff were "attempting to revive the unit when a fire reportedly broke out in the boiler, resulting in the explosion" at 10 o'clock the next morning.

As the WSWs previously noted in its report on the May 7 explosion, NLC has a notorious record of ignoring basic safety measures.

The *downtoearth.org* website has stated that over the past five years NLC has had two major accidents and one minor one that have exposed serious maintenance and safety problems in the old units being used in the company's thermal power stations.

The efficient and safe-operating life of a thermal power plant is around 25 years. Despite calls by the Delhi-based non-profit Centre for Science and Environment, however, NLC has delayed commissioning new units. Its power stations have been running with units that should have been retired between 2011 and 2015. In fact, some of its units have been in operation for as long as fifty-seven years.

A report on this month's explosion by *newsclick.in* included comments from NLC management, the trade unions and the Indian government.

In an attempt to diffuse widespread anger over the catastrophe, management has suspended a senior official and India's coal ministry initiated a high-level inquiry and internal probe. An NLC official told the media that at least 3 million rupees (\$US40,000) will be given to each family of the workers killed and 500,000 rupees (\$6,770) to those injured. Regular

employment will also be provided to an eligible member of the family of the deceased.

Additionally, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister K. Palaniswami has announced 300,000-rupee compensation for the families of workers killed, along with 100,000 rupees (\$1,330) and 50,000 rupees (\$665) to those who suffered serious and mild injuries respectively. India's home minister, Amit Shah, offered condolences for those killed and said the victims and survivors will be given "all possible help."

Shah and Palaniswami's crocodile tears and the pittance in compensation packages given by NLC and the state government are an attempt to dissipate the growing anger of workers and their families and to cover up company and government responsibility for the repeated industrial accidents.

The NLC's two recognised unions are affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the Labour Progressive Front (LPF)—federations of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and its ally the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the main state opposition party, respectively. These organisations are complicit in the tragedy, having refused to seriously demand mandatory safety measures at NLC plants.

While the last explosion forced leaders of these unions and affiliated parties to make some "criticism" of safety conditions at NLC plants, this rhetoric was so much hot air.

C. Amirthalingam, general secretary of the NLC General Workers and Employees Union, which is affiliated to the Stalinist CITU, told the media: "The cleaning of boilers used to happen on each shift till a few years back. Now, with the decreasing workforce, daily maintenance has almost stopped. The privatisation of maintenance work and the consequent improper maintenance work have led to recurring accidents."

CPM state secretary K. Balakrishnan declared: "The private contractors have failed in proper maintenance of the boilers leading to the accident. The details on the process of allocating contracts for maintenance works need immediate enquiry by a high-level committee and action on the culprits."

Amirthalingam and Balakrishnan's comments are bogus and cynical. These union officials and the organisations they head have blocked any mobilisation

of workers in strikes or other industrial action to demand the decommissioning of outdated and dangerous plants and the establishment of basic safety standards and modern procedures.



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