

An explosion at an Indian fireworks factory kills 20 workers

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17 February 2021

The criminal disregard of the Indian ruling class for the lives of workers has once again been demonstrated by the death of 20 workers, including a child and pregnant woman, in a massive explosion at a fireworks factory in southern India.

The blast took place last Friday at the Sree Mariamman Fireworks factory at Achankulam village in Virudhunagar district, which is known as India's firecrackers capital, in Tamil Nadu. The explosion occurred around 1:30 p.m. when workers were about to take their lunch break.

Three bodies were charred beyond recognition. The death toll could rise as at least 35 more workers were hospitalized with extensive burns from the blast.

Fire and rescue services workers were unable to immediately enter the premises as chemicals kept exploding inside the factory. It was only some four hours later that more than 50 dead and injured workers were found inside.

Even though the cause of the explosion is yet to be established, an officer from the local fire department told the media that the blast occurred while chemicals were being mixed to make firecrackers. "Friction during the mixing of chemicals appears to have caused the explosion," he said.

The factory complex, spread over 18 acres of land, was involved in manufacturing "fancy-type fire crackers." It comprised a total of 60 rooms and was divided into several units. The explosion took place in a unit that had been divided into 15 rooms all of which have burnt to the ground.

The 15 rooms were leased to four separate manufacturers. They had been employing more and more workers creating highly congested spaces, in complete disregard for basic safety requirements for the dangerous industry as well as the current COVID-19 pandemic. This factory unit operated under the Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organization (PESO) license from Nagpur.

In an attempt to counter public anger, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced compensation of 200,000 rupees (\$US2,700) for the families of each of the dead workers and 50,000 rupees for each of the injured. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami announced similar grants. Indian governments, state and central, routinely give such handouts to the victims of tragic incidents, having turned a blind eye to the dangerous conditions that have caused them.

The latest explosion follows a pattern in the industry over decades. A worker from the fireworks industry told the media after the explosion that such accidents are frequent, causing permanent disabilities in many cases. Also exposure to various toxic substances used in making fireworks including barium nitrate, aluminium compounds and potassium nitrate can cause various diseases for workers.

Last September and October, two explosions in fireworks factories in Tamil Nadu killed at least 12 workers. Earlier in February and March, 11 workers died in two separate factory blasts in the same region. According to official data, at least 250 workers have perished and many more have been injured in around 150 explosions in the region during the past decade alone.

In Virudhunagar district, an explosion in a fireworks unit in Mudalipatti in September 2012 killed 40 workers and injured 38 others. In July 2009, more than 40 workers were killed in another blast in Namaskarichanpatti.

India has the world's second largest fireworks industry after China, mostly concentrated in Virudhunagar district, which has more than 1,000 factory units employing an estimated one million workers. The industry is considered a thriving business as pyrotechnics are often used in India for celebrations including weddings and festivals such as Diwali. The factories also cater to the Indian army's Ammunition and Ordnance factories. Their owners are reaping superprofits at the expense of the workers' lives.

Most workers are from the Dalit caste, previously known as the untouchables, which is the “lowest” in the reactionary Hindu caste hierarchy. The deaths of these workers are quickly forgotten by the media. Poverty and the lack of education drives many to take up these dangerous jobs to earn a living. Significant numbers of women and children are working in these factories.

Many fireworks workers labour in makeshift factory units which are hot, humid and cramped. Even though each room is allowed four workers according to safety regulations, more than three times that number are often assigned to a room.

Workers are not only forced to work long hours but also even bring their children to work as the low wages are inadequate for basic needs. They are required to handle dangerous explosives in these virtual death traps without any precautionary training.

Some of the previous explosions were connected to practices including rough handling of chemicals by untrained and unskilled workers, spillage or overloading of chemicals during the filling process, and working outside permitted areas. The ban on using iron tools or hinges due to the potential for sparks is often ignored.

Even the minimal safety and health regulations set by authorities are not strictly monitored in part due to the lack of inspectors. Action over safety breaches rarely occurs despite the illegal sub-leasing of work to unlicensed cottage units being widely acknowledged. The common reasons cited for accidents also include the overstocking of explosives, raw material and finished goods, and employment of workers in excess of the permitted numbers.

Successive governments are criminally responsible for endangering the lives of the fireworks workers, who are one of the most oppressed sections of the Indian working class.



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