

Indian chemical factory explosion and fire kill 18

Yuan Darwin
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As many as 18 people have died from a June 7 fire at an SVS Aqua Technologies chemical plant located in the Pirangut industrial zone, some 40 kilometres from Pune, the second largest city in the western Indian state of Maharashtra. The plant produces chlorine dioxide for water purification.

“The fire broke out during plastic packing,” said Devendra Potphode, the chief fire officer for the Pune Metropolitan Region Development Authority Fire Services. “Smoke was so much that female workers could not find an escape. We have recovered 17 bodies—15 women and 2 men.” The fire was punctuated by two powerful explosions. It took several hours for the bodies of the victims, all charred beyond recognition, to be located and sent to Sassoon General Hospital for identification and post-mortems.

Under conditions of mounting anger among the plant’s workers and the families of the dead, the local police filed a FIR (First Investigation Report) against the CEO of the company on June 7 and arrested its owner Nikunj Shah the following day on charges of culpable homicide. Preliminary investigations have pointed to criminal negligence on the part of management, with flammable materials stored without following prescribed safety norms.

The Maharashtra state government—which is a three-party coalition led by the fascistic Shiv Sena and that includes the Congress Party and a regional off-shoot from it, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP)—has announced an ex gratia payment of 500,000 rupees (\$US 6,828) to the families of each of the deceased. In announcing the payment, the state’s Deputy Chief Minister, Ajit Pawar of the NCP, said an expert committee has been designated to ascertain the cause of the fire and assign any responsibility for it.

India’s far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led

central government has announced 200,000 rupees compensation for the kin of each of the deceased and 50,000 rupees for the injured. “Pained by the loss of lives due to a fire at a factory in Pune, Maharashtra. Condolences to the bereaved families,” tweeted Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

These are crocodile tears. The tragic loss of life and terrible injuries among the SVS Aqua Technologies workers are a direct result of the callous indifference of company management and both state and central governments to worker safety.

Modi’s government, in which the Shiv Sena served as a junior partner until November 2019, has relentlessly attacked workers’ rights, including by further weakening India’s notoriously lax environmental and occupational health and safety laws.

The loss of life from the Pune factory fire comes on top of the deaths of thousands on a daily basis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which, fueled by the highly contagious and more lethal Delta variant, continues to rage across India.

Although the authorities are now reporting less than 100,000 new infections per day, India is still recording nearly 4,000 deaths daily, even according to the official figures, which are almost universally acknowledged to be a vast undercount. Maharashtra reported a seven-day average of over 11,000 new COVID-19 cases per day last week with a 1.7 percent case fatality rate.

Modi’s real concern is that the factory fire disaster will undermine his government’s demand that workers return to their jobs amid a still raging pandemic, risking their lives and those of their loved ones.

Even when India was averaging more than 400,000 new cases daily in the second week of May, the Hindu supremacist BJP government was adamant that it would fulfill Modi’s April 20 vow to “save India from

lockdown,” not the pandemic. Citing the recent fall in cases, Modi, for several weeks now, has been urging those state governments that did enact partial lockdown measures, while leaving most industrial production to continue operating at full tilt, to quickly remove them.

The Pune factory explosion and fire is just one of many thousands of examples of major capitalist corporations sacrificing workers’ lives and forcing them to use hazardous materials and dilapidated machinery with little to no safety equipment or training, so as to maintain production and maximize profits.

Last year, as India reopened from the Modi government’s ruinous, ill-prepared COVID-19 lockdown, there was a series of major industrial accidents, due to companies’ failure to carry out proper inspection and maintenance before resuming or accelerating the pace of their operations. These include: a toxic gas leak at an LG Polymers plant in Andhra Pradesh on May 7, 2020, which killed 11 and made more than 1000 sick; a June 3 boiler explosion at Yashashvi Raasayan Private Limited’s Dahej, Gujarat facility that killed at least eight people and injured some 40; and boiler explosions at Neyveli Lignite Corporation’s thermal power plant in Tamil Nadu on May 7, and again on July 1, that killed at least 20 workers.

According to Labour and Employment Ministry data, 3,562 workers died in factory accidents in India between 2014 and 2016, and more than 51,000 were injured during the same period—an average of three deaths and 47 injuries every single day. A 2017 study by the British Safety Council painted a far bleaker picture, reporting that 48,000 workers die of occupational accidents in India every year.

Successive Indian governments have worked to transform the country into a cheap labor haven for giant multinational corporations and international investors, who have systematically neglected workers’ health and safety while reaping billions in profits.

Although central and state government authorities have worked with employers to cover up the number of COVID-19 workplace infections and deaths during India’s devastating second wave of the pandemic, reports suggest that the deaths number in the thousands, if not tens of thousands.

Late last month, major automakers in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, including Ford India, Hyundai,

and Renault-Nissan, were forced to idle their operations in the face of protests and strikes by workers outraged over the lack of protection from COVID-19.



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