

Fire at Indonesian nickel smelter leaves 19 dead

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A fire at a nickel smelting plant in Indonesia on Sunday killed at least 19 workers while leaving as many as 40 others injured. Industrial accidents in this sector are common, with the disaster shining a light on the brutal and unsafe working conditions in the nickel processing industry and throughout Indonesia as a whole.

The fire killed 11 Indonesian workers and eight from other countries. It took place at a plant owned by Indonesia Tsingshan Stainless Steel (ITSS), which is a subsidiary of Tsingshan Holding Group, based in China. ITSS is located in the Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park (IMIP) on Sulawesi Island. IMIP is jointly owned by Tsingshan and Indonesia's Bintang Delapan Group.

The accident occurred at about 5:30 a.m. while workers were conducting repairs on a furnace, according to a preliminary investigation. Dedy Kurniawan, a spokesman for the industrial complex, initially stated that a flammable liquid had ignited, causing nearby oxygen tanks to explode. He later changed his statement and claimed no oxygen tanks were on the site and no explosion had taken place.

Dedy stated that after a furnace had been shut off, its "walls then collapsed and the remaining iron slag flowed out, causing a fire and resulting in some workers at the location suffering injuries and even fatalities."

In response to this tragedy, around 300 workers rallied on Wednesday demanding improved safety conditions. Workers chanted slogans such as, "No production is worth a life." Others expressed their anger to the media. Parlin Hidayat, the cousin of Muhammad Taufik, a 40-year-old worker who was killed, told Al Jazeera, "The family is grieving, he was the breadwinner," leaving behind a wife and two

children. "They hope there will be no more incidents like this in the future, let him be the last victim."

Wednesday's rally was organized by the Serikat Pekerja Indonesia Sejahtera (SPIS) trade union, which submitted 23 demands to management, including improving the maintenance of nickel smelters and better health clinics capable of dealing with emergencies. The union claimed that it would strike if its demands were not met within three days.

Katsaing, the regional head of the union, told Reuters, "Our main demand is for the companies to comply with the occupational health and safety law." However, he previously told *Wired* magazine in an article published in February, "The health and safety regulations now are toothless."

Dedy, the complex spokesman, dismissed the union's demands. He stated the rally had "no impact on operations" throughout the industrial park and claimed that ITSS had supposedly already implemented the demands.

Workers should not place any faith in the safety regulations or in the companies or government to improve conditions. To claim that if only the company had supposedly followed the law, the explosion would not have happened only deflects workers' anger away from the government and the capitalist system, which is the root cause of these disasters.

Accidents are common throughout the nickel industry and are the result of President Joko Widodo government's drive to turn Indonesia into a major producer of the mineral for companies around the world. Indonesia has the world's largest nickel reserves, at an estimated 21 million tonnes. Between 2020 and 2022, nickel production doubled to 1.6 million tonnes, or more than 48 percent of the global output.

Nickel is used for products such as electric vehicle (EV) batteries and stainless steel, making Indonesia a major part of the supply chain in the production of EVs. Jakarta has also signed deals worth as much as \$US15 billion with companies like South Korea's Hyundai Motors and Taiwan-based Foxconn. The government is also actively trying to entice Tesla to invest in Indonesia in what will no doubt be a further race to the bottom when it comes to workers' conditions.

Widodo therefore has no intention of addressing health and safety conditions, despite claims from Ministry of Manpower Deputy Minister Afriansyah Noor that Jakarta will strengthen work safety laws. Similarly, none of the three candidates running in February's presidential election will address these issues.

Instead, the ruling class is seeking to sow divisions between Indonesian and Chinese workers to distract from the responsibility of the local and central governments and from the capitalist system as a whole. The media has focused on the fact that the nickel smelter at IMIP where Sunday's fire occurred is Chinese-owned.

Yet Chinese workers are no less exploited than their Indonesian class brothers and sisters. Both sections of the working class face similar brutal conditions. The IMIP complex hosts 18 nickel processing companies, employing more than 70,000 workers. In April, two workers were killed at the complex when they were buried under nickel slag. This is not limited to IMIP. At a plant located further north on Sulawesi, another two workers were killed in January during protests over safety conditions and low pay at Gunbuster Nickel Industry.

Wired magazine wrote in February that workers at IMIP labor for up to 15 hours a day with no days off for as long as three months. They earn less than \$US25 a day. Workers struggle to continuing working as health, safety, and environmental needs take a backseat to profit. One 18-year-old worker stated, "Sometimes it's hard to breathe. I'm concerned, but I can't do anything."

Trend Asia, a non-government organization based in Indonesia, reported in March that between 2015 and 2020, a total of 47 workers in the nickel industry were killed in accidents while 10 others committed suicide as a result of the conditions.

This is not limited to the nickel industry. Jakarta's Ministry of Manpower reported in February in its "National Occupational Safety and Health Profile" that across the country, 6,552 workers had died in workplace accidents in 2021, nearly doubling the number of deaths from the previous year (3,410). Total accidents have also grown, with 234,370 in 2021, rising from 210,789 in 2019.

The rise in workplace safety accidents and deaths also corresponds to the refusal of capitalist governments around the world, including Jakarta, to address the COVID-19 pandemic. In what is undoubtedly a vast undercounting, there have been more than 6.8 million COVID cases and 161,921 deaths in Indonesia. Just as virus mitigation measures were torn up, so are workplace safety measures, all in the name of profit.



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