

Horrific death of female factory worker in Tamil Nadu highlights unsafe working conditions across India

Martina Inessa, Nanda Kumar
26 August 2024

Umarani—a young female contract worker at the state-run Kakkalur Aavin milk factory in Thiruvallur on the outskirts of Tamil Nadu’s capital, Chennai—was killed August 20 when her hair and shawl got caught in a conveyor belt. Umarani’s horrific, agonizing death starkly highlights the unsafe, all too often lethal, working conditions that prevail in both private and state-run factories and workplaces throughout India.

Umarani, a 30 year-old mother of three children, hailed from Bommampatti in Tamil Nadu’s Salem district and started working at the factory about six months ago. Karthi, her now widower husband, is an employee at a private factory in Irungattukottai, another industrial suburb of Chennai.

Umarani was collecting milk packets from the conveyor belt and stacking them in trays in a tub, when first her shawl and then her hair got caught in the conveyor belt of the milk vending motor. Umarani’s head got pulled into the motor and was severed killing her on the spot. This could have been avoided if she had been wearing a headband, but this was not mandatory at the factory and no inspections were carried out. In addition, there was no switch near at hand to stop the conveyor belt while it was moving slowly. Even though her coworkers realized what was happening due to her screams, they were unable to reach the switch quickly because many tubs were stored nearby. This prevented the workers from immediately turning off the switch and saving Umarani’s life.

After the police arrived at the factory, her body was recovered and sent to the Thiruvallur District Government Medical College Hospital for an autopsy. There were around 15 contract workers working with her including 10 additional office laborers. The employees of the Kakkalur dairy and the local community were left in shock, with milk supply from the facility temporarily suspended. Even two days after the tragedy, some contract workers remained away from work and jobs were being done by the office workers.

Aavin is a state Government Cooperative under the ownership of the Tamil Nadu Co-operative Milk Producers’ Federation Limited (TCMPF), the Ministry of Milk and Dairy Development and Government of Tamil Nadu. Under the “Aavin” trademark, it has assumed control of all commercial

operations, including the procurement, processing, packaging, and consumer sale of milk and milk products such as powdered milk, ghee and ice cream, across the state.

The day after the industrial accident, the local Tiruvallur police arrested Varun Kumar, supervisor of the Kakkalur dairy unit, on the charge of causing death due to “negligence.” Predictably, Jeyaseelan, the contractor who supplies contract workers for the milk factory, who is a Dravida Munnethra Kazagam (DMK, the ruling party in Tamil Nadu state) counselor in the local government body for the Kakkalur area where the Aavin Milk Factory is located, was not questioned over the unsafe conditions. These conditions persist for the contract workers because they ensure a sizeable share in Aavin’s profits flow to the contractor at the expense of the lives of workers like Umarani.

SA Pannusamy of the Tamil Nadu Milk Dealers Welfare Association said that one million rupees (about \$12,000) should be released immediately as “compensation” to the kin of Umarani. Still, no statement has been made by the state government that it is ready to grant even this meager “compensation.”

Workers at the Kakkalur Aavin milk factory who spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters described the unsafe working conditions that led to Umarani’s horrific death. According to them, there are three shifts in the factory, with about fifteen contract laborers working each shift. They get a meager wage of \$US 119.20 to \$US 178.80 per month.

Not surprisingly, Milk & Dairy Development Minister Mano Thangaraj in the DMK state government directly placed the blame on Umarani. In response to a reporter’s question about whether the worker was at fault or whether the machine had a problem, he responded: “This is surely carelessness, but whether it is carelessness or an accident is unclear.” Covering up the government’s own criminal role in the tragic death, the minister added: “This will not happen frequently, nor has it happened before...It is more likely that this occurred due to her carelessness.”

This was not the first time that the victims have been blamed for their own deaths. For instance, on October 31, 2010, a

young female worker—just twenty-two years old—was left to die on the assembly line at the Nokia factory in southern India after her head and neck got trapped and crushed inside a robotic loading machine. She was blamed by the leaders of the Labour Progressive Front (LPF), the trade union federation affiliated to the DMK, a partner of the then Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) national government for her “carelessness.” They said that she lost her life because the worker had been “chatting with her coworker during the work.”

The DMK minister further whitewashed the role of the state-run milk corporation, telling the media: “There are SOPs (Standard Operation Procedures) in place for everything. The machines have operated for 25 years, and we have never encountered such an accident.... [W]e are investigating how this accident occurred.” He remained silent on why the hair cover cap or uniform are not mandatory for workers in the factory. As with numerous similar incidents in the past, this “investigation” will be cast aside as soon as possible or used to pin the blame on the worker, as the minister has already done.

The minister has ample reason to protect the profit-thirsty milk company from public anger. As Milk and Dairy Product Minister Thangaraj told the Hindu in November 27, 2023, the amount of money made from the sale of milk products has grown from \$181,183 to over \$286,079 daily. In May 2023, Aavin raised milk sales in Chennai alone, from over 1,430,000 liters per day to over 1,500,000 liters per day

Industrial accidents take place on a daily basis throughout India as the central and state governments allow ravenous investors to exploit workers without restraint, ignoring basic safety measures in factories and other workplaces. For this purpose, in 2020, the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi anti-democratically rammed a half-dozen blatantly pro-corporate labour “reforms” through the national parliament.

According to the Directorate General Factory Advice Service and Labour Institutes (DGFASLI), a state body based in the western Indian state of Maharashtra that monitors industrial accidents, there is a *daily average* of three worker deaths and 11 injuries occurring in industries in the state. However, as there is no universal data collecting system on these accidents across industries in India, and employers are anxious to cover up injuries for fear of fines or closer inspections, nobody has a true estimate—let alone an accurate figure—on the number of workers killed or seriously injured on the job across India in a given period, be it a week, month or year.

The following is only a small selection of some of the tragic incidents reported in the media so far this year:

*In May, a boiler blast at a chemical factory at the Dombivili MIDC in Maharashtra killed at least 13 workers and injured more than 60 workers and residents in the area. It was revealed that the accident occurred due to gross violations of safety measures by the factory owners.

*On May 2, NewsClick reported that 22 contract workers

deprived of even limited social security and other benefits died during the previous week in workplace accidents across the states. These included 3 deaths of workers cleaning manholes; 8 workers killed in a factory blast; and 4 workers who died in a mining accident.

*On Aug. 21, that is the day after Umarani was killed, an explosion at the Escientia Advanced Sciences pharmaceutical ingredients factory in the Atchutapuram, Andhra Pradesh, Special Economic Zone left 17 workers dead and more than 40 injured. According to news reports, workers had repeatedly complained of the sort of chemical leak that is believed to have triggered the blast, but management ignored their concerns.

Unions with a mass membership in the Chennai area, such as the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), have said nothing about Umarani’s horrific death. These union federations are affiliated with the main Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI) respectively. The capitalist ruling elite is able to carry out its ruthless drive for profit at the cost of workers’ lives and livelihoods workers because these parties and their union affiliates have systematically suppressed the class struggle.

The Stalinist parties are openly aligned with and participate in right-wing electoral blocs with big business parties like the Congress Party at the national level and the DMK in Tamil Nadu. To compete in the world market and offer up India as a cheap labour platform for international finance capital, the ruling class is determined to ensure that the multi-million workforce remains an object for the most brutal forms of exploitation.

Workers should break from these anti-working class trade union federations and form their own independent action committees at every workplace. Only such committees can genuinely fight for better wages, safety in work places and other favorable working conditions in factories and work places. Indian workers organized in these action committees must join with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International to establish unity with their class brothers and sisters around the world in a common struggle for their basic social and democratic rights against the capitalist employers and the governments and political parties that ruthlessly defend their interests.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact